MAMMOTH

WESTERN

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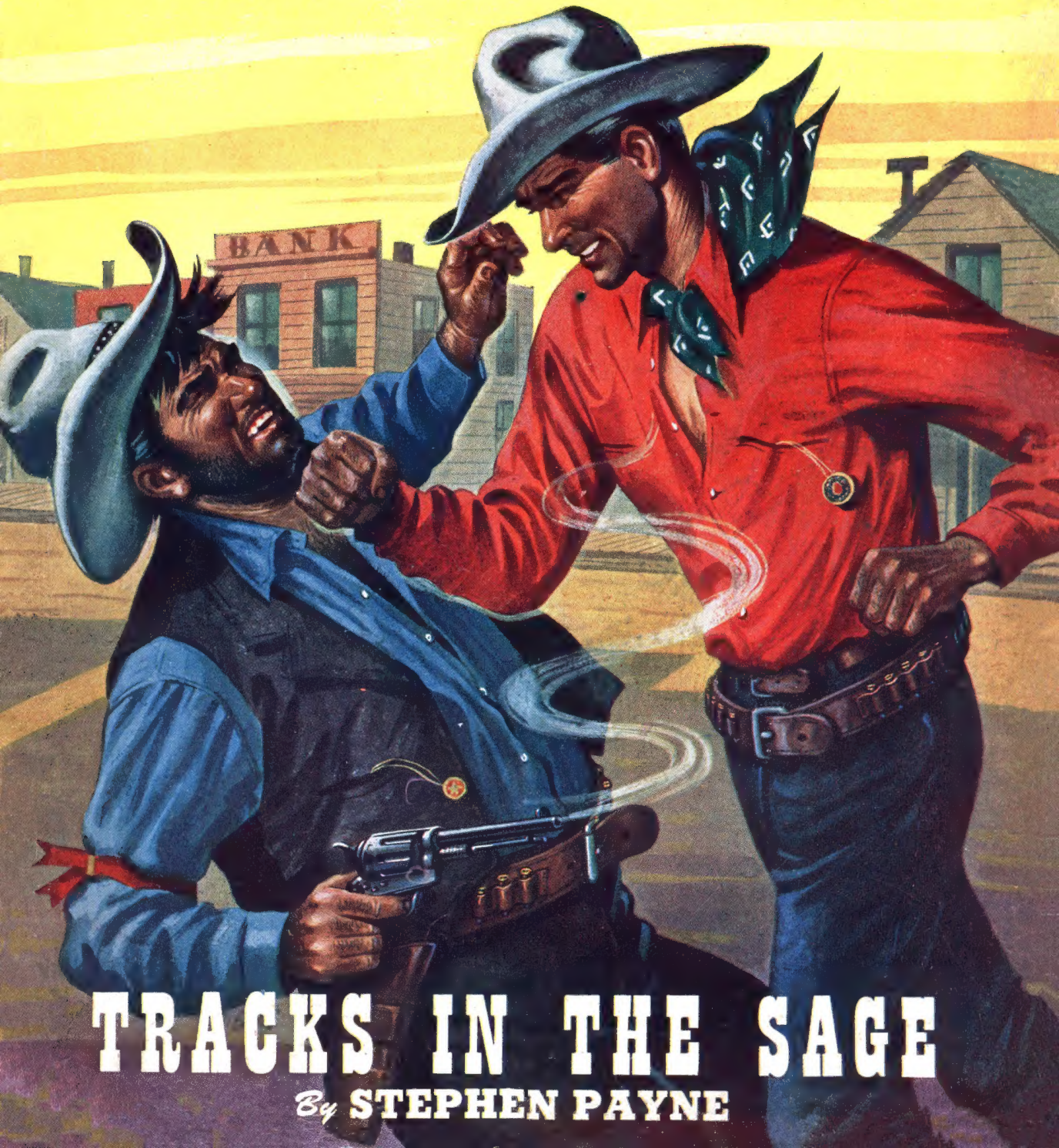

TRACKS IN THE SAGE

By STEPHEN PAYNE

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One wish has been fulfilled. Won by 3½ years of deadly struggle. With God's help, we have prevailed.

Now we have a chance to make another wish come true. For most of us, the outlook is a bright one. If we will simply use the brains, the will, the energy, the enterprise . . . the materials and resources . . . with which we won our war, we can't fail to win the peace and to make this the richest, happiest land the world has known.

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ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

This is an official U. S. Treasury advertisement—prepared under auspices of Treasury Department and War Advertising Council

MAMMOTH WESTERN, with this issue, brings you a *legitimate* western writer. His name is Stephen Payne, and he *usually* writes for the *Saturday Evening Post*. One of his recent appearances there was "Shaggy Lays Off," and if you read that, you know what's in store for you with "Tracks In The Sage" in this issue!

PAYNE was born on a North Park, Colorado ranch, and raised on a horse. So he knows the west, from bleached buffalo bones to dude wranglers. He even married a red-headed schoolmarm, just as it says in the stories! So you get the idea. . . . Well, today he lives in Denver, and he likes to think of the old days when he was a western puncher and rancher; which gives him the idea of bringing it back fresher to his mind by writing about it. We're proud to think that he likes the idea of writing about it for us!

ENNEN REAVES HALL comes back again this issue with "Angel In The River," which is just the kind of yarn she writes best. Need we rope and hogtie you now, to get you to read it?

ANOTHER repeater is Giff Cheshire, authoring "River Passage." Now, you might have become accustomed to seeing cows in western stories; if you have, you've already got that "formula" bellyache so many of you western fans have been protesting for years. Well, this one's made to order for you. It's a western about the Columbia river, in the raw days when the gun was the law on the river as well as on the range. Judging from your letters to us, you approve of us giving you a western magazine with stories about the West, and we mean all of it!

L. P. HOLMES does "Empty Fences" in the style to which he is accustomed—and that means in swell style. It's 15,000 words that you'll eat and like it.

RICHARD BRISTER is an enterprising chap—he sends us so many manuscripts we get dizzy just counting 'em. So, being fair-minded editors, we read 'em all, knowing practice makes perfect. We are sorry we can't buy 'em all, but here's one of the best—a short one named "A Rope For The Bridegroom," and if you've ever been a bridegroom, you'll appreciate the fix this guy was in!

NAT W. McKELVEY, who likes to spin 'em along truthful lines, gives us an historical one called "Scattergun Reckoning." It's about some beef the army needed and some beef that had been appropriated by a crowd of guys who underestimated the fire-power of a scattergun!

"KNIVES Don't Misfire!" says S. M. Tenneshaw, and maybe he's got something there. Anyway, this newcomer to the pulp field proves once more that he can pound out a good yarn with the rest of 'em, and no apologies necessary.

"MRS. HELL" is one you'll find yourself swallowing hard on many a time—but doggone you, if you don't fight down your amazement and begin to enjoy it hugely as you go along. We think this one's out of the beaten track in a rather strange way. It's aimed right at your adrenals, to prod you out of your seat. It should do it!

ACCORDING to the letters we got on our January issue, *Mammoth Western* is the magazine that'll be hard to find on your newsstand from now on! We, the editors, want to thank you very much for all those kind words. Especially mentioned was Les Savage and Robert Moore Williams and Ennen Reaves Hall and Norrell Gregory and James C. Lynch—why say, *everybody* got fan mail in that issue! Apparently every yarn in the magazine was a bell-ringer. You can imagine how pleased that makes us. We feel a rosy glow yet, and we get even rosier when we realize that this issue is an improvement! One kind reader even said that the only thing that could indicate to him we weren't a slick was the texture of the paper, and the only thing that could convince him the slicks weren't pulp was the paper! Well, your editor has always felt that the only way to write a so-called "slick" story was to do a really good *pulp* story. When readers tell us these things with a straight face, we get all bloated up! Anyway, it makes us work harder, so if it's flattery, you'll get what you're angling for!

WE'RE pleased, too, at the reaction you gave to our art work—especially the front and back covers. Back cover paintings are something you get only in a Ziff-Davis magazine, and thanks for your approval. We'll keep 'em. As for the interiors, they'll stay top-notch too! *Rap*

All STORIES Complete

TRACKS IN THE SAGE (Novelet—25,000) ..... by Stephen Payne 6
Illustrated by Tom Boyd
These were tracks in the sage that led to the greatest gun battle for a woman's happiness ever seen.

ANGEL IN THE RIVER (Short—5,500) ..... by Ennen Reaves Hall .. 48
Illustrated by Brady
Whiskey running for the Indians was more than a crime—it demanded the attention of an angel.

RIVER PASSAGE (Novelet—9,800) ..... by Giff Cheshire 60
Illustrated by Rod Ruth
Down the Columbia river floated a body; up the river on a boat went three men and two women . . .

KNIVES DON'T MISFIRE! (Novelet—16,400) ..... by S. M. Tenneshaw ... 80
Illustrated by Malcolm Smith
It just isn't good sense to come looking for trouble with only a knife to back you up—or is it?

SCATTERGUN RECKONING (Short—2,400) ..... by Nat W. McKelvey .. 110
Illustrated by Robert Fuqua
The army was going to get its beef if the scattergun had to spray lead all over the Southwest!

EMPTY FENCES (Novelet—15,000) ..... by L. P. Holmes 120
Illustrated by Rod Ruth
Empty fences don't enclose much wealth, and a rancher has to do something when he finds them empty!

A ROPE FOR THE BRIDEGROOM (Short—6,400) ..... by Richard Brister 144
Illustrated by H. W. McCauley
In an hour he'd be married—but somebody stole his hat. Can't get married without a hat, can you?

MRS. HELL (Novelet—9,900) ..... by Joe Austell Small ... 158
Illustrated by Arnold Kohn
She sure didn't look like Hell, but every man jack in the Valley called her Mrs. Hell, and meant it!

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Front cover painting by George B. Eads (Michael Baim & Associates) illustrating a scene from "Tracks in the Sage." Back cover painting by Joe W. Tillotson illustrating "Sons of the West"

MAMMOTH WESTERN APRIL 1946

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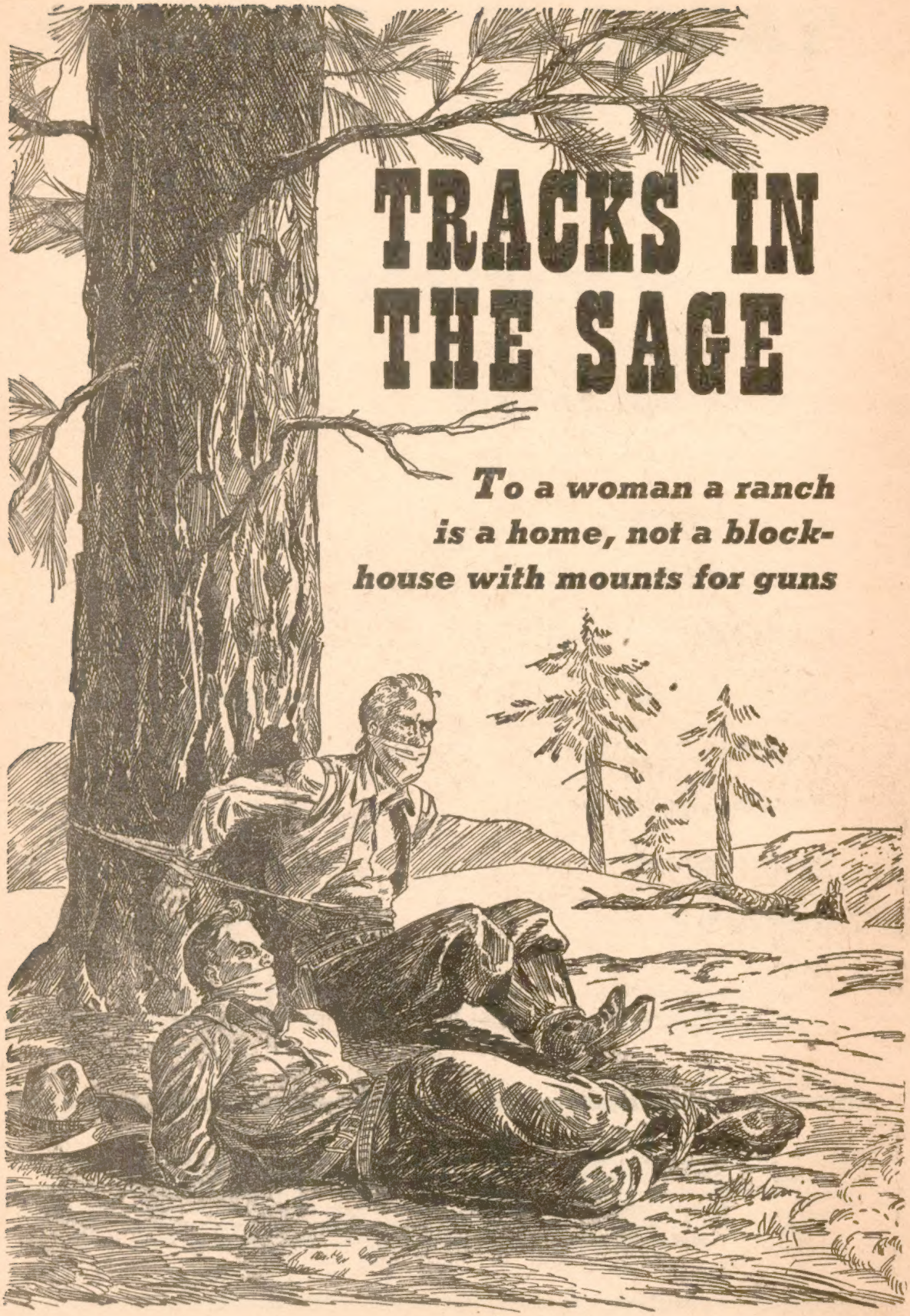

TRACKS IN THE SAGE

To a woman a ranch is a home, not a block-house with mounts for guns

THE kitchen there on the Slash F ranch was simmering hot on this bright July afternoon, but Annette Foster didn't notice the heat. She had built up the wood fire and was baking pies and a cake in a sort of frantic effort to forget the mental upset and the uneasiness crowding her mind.

Heretofore when there was serious trouble brewing between Slash F and Cross M she had been able to dismiss her worry by plunging into hard work either indoors or outdoors. Today she found no relief whatever. Try as she did to keep from straining her pretty grey-green eyes out across the meadow

By Stephen Payne

There, tied to a tree, Annette found her two menfolk, helpless and mad plumb through

valley of Slash F and the tumbled sage hills beyond the river bluffs, she was always rushing to the open door and looking, looking westward into the rangeland's distance.

Surely Donald Marr would come to say goodbye. Don wouldn't just ride away without a word, as Curly Bent, a Slash F hand who faithfully reported to Annette all news he heard from Cross M, had said Don must have done.

Surely, too, Daddy Jim Foster would soon be coming home, unless— Annette didn't want to think about that unless; it was too starkly terrifying. But just before he rode away Dad Foster had been chewing one end of his thin brown mustache, the corners of his stubborn mouth were turned down, and his faded old eyes had become bleak and hard and frightening.

Annette had seen him out of temper many times with their neighbors on Cross M, which meant, specifically, with old John Clayton Marr. Dad seldom spoke of Marr by name. He was "that damned ornery, cantankerous, bull-headed Scot." And John Marr, as Annette knew, spoke even less kindly of her own father, both behind his back and directly to his face.

The two knotty, case-hardened old cowmen had been squabbling for as long as blonde Annette, now twenty-one, could remember. They grazed their herds on the same range, a vast chunk of open land lying between the two ranches, and each spring, summer and autumn they squabbled about that range, each owner jealously watching the other to see he didn't slip something over.

But somehow, until today, they had always avoided a knock-down-and-drag-out fight. Now at last, however, John Clayton Marr had done something to rile James Foster as never before. Early this spring Marr had brought in six purebred Aberdeen Angus bulls, for Marr, who hailed originally from Scotland, loved the "doddies," and had threatened for years to make this change from Herefords to black Angus cattle.

Foster, however, would be damned if he wanted a lot of black cattle with splotched black and white faces to grow into his almost straight white-faced herd. It was one of those thorny problems rangemen understand well, and he had warned Marr:

"Don't you turn those black bulls on our range."

Possibly because he had not wanted a showdown at the time, Marr had hedged, "Now I might be planning to raise an Angus herd under fence. Which will be nothing to you, Jim."

There the matter had rested until before noon of this mid-July day. Then Curly Bent, who'd been riding range, had come home to the Slash F with his horse a-lather, and Annette had heard him shout to her father, busy in the blacksmith shop, "Ho, Jim! Marr's turned them black critters out and he's spilt 'em all across the range!"

Jim Foster asked no questions. Instead, he stamped to the house, all storm signals flying, his lean, corded neck bowed like a bull's. As he grabbed his Winchester from wall pegs, Annette had clutched him arm.

"Daddy, don't do anything silly. I'll go with you to see that you and—"

He'd brushed her aside roughly. "Stay home, girl. This is man's business. Stay home or I'll get really mad," as if he wasn't "really mad" already.

Helplessly, Annette, her rosy cheeks gone white, had watched her father climb stiffly to his saddle and ride out.

CURLY had slouched to the house then and had given Annette the second barrel of bad news, this almost

as shocking as the first, yet in an entirely different way. Curly knew how the girl and Donald Marr had been meeting out on the range, at neighbors' ranches, and in town. Furthermore, Curly, who was as loyal to the girl of Slash F as old Timberline Johnson of Cross M was to John Clayton Marr's only son, realized the young folks were very much that way about one another.

Curly said with studied casualness, "I got this from one of the Cross M boys, Biff Sloan: Don and his old man had one hell—one heck of a row yesterday evenin'. . . . This time Don couldn't take it, seems like. He's punched a hole in the wind. . . . Old cantanker—should I say Mr. Marr?—is going around with his face froze and not sayin' a word, but actin' like he'll bite himself if nothin' else shows up to bite."

The news didn't hit Annette very hard at first. She asked for details. Curly could give none at all. Cross M cowboy Biff Sloan hadn't known what the father and son had quarreled about, hadn't known where Don intended going, or if he would be back.

Later, however, after Curly had gone to work again, the emotional angle of her problems had begun to take its bitter hold on Annette's frayed nerves. Don had gone without saying goodbye! It hurt so deeply that if she had not realized till now her own tender feelings toward the black-haired, almost back-eyed, strapping young man, full realization of all he meant in her life was now brought home. Was the thread of the romance which had taken root and grown and blossomed in the shadow of a silly, yet tragic, feud to be snapped as if it were nothing?

The sun was dipping toward the high mountain-palisaded horizon, and Annette, shading her eyes against its glare as she looked far into the distance, lost track of time and burned two precious pies until they were charred and worthless.

She was scraping them out of the pans when a patter of hoofs sounded from the opposite direction, the east, and the girl of Slash F wasn't quite sure whether to be glad or sorry to see Claude Ormond arriving on his wonder black horse. Mostly, she believed, she was glad, and certainly she was relieved.

She could talk freely to Claude Ormond about ranch problems, for Claude, like Don Marr, was definitely courting the girl of Slash F. He had been, in fact, giving her a great rush, and had twice proposed. But of course Annette was too femininely clever to reveal to either young man his exact status, or to exhibit her heart on her sleeves. And, to be perfectly honest, there really were times when she didn't know which she liked the best.

Don, with his big-shouldered, rough-hewn body and his equally rough-hewn, strong, dark face, had a shade the best of Claude in physique. Yet Claude, tall, trim and blond, had it all over the Scotchman's son in education and polish and the ability to see through a thing in a twinkling. He was clever, and had proved he was a sharp business man. On the other hand, Don Marr was inherently shrewd, and when she was with him she felt he was substantial.

If it came to a showdown, which would she choose, Annette was asking herself as she watched Claude Ormond swing down and tie his black, and then step eagerly toward the house.

CLAUDE always wore laundered shirts and flashy neckties. He now pushed his wide-brimmed, flat-crowned black hat back on his high forehead, and Annette noticed once again his

wavy brown hair, sharp blue eyes and tight-lipped mouth. Claude was in the real estate business there in Elkmont town, and it was rumored he had money. But if he had, he never made investments of his own. He contented himself with acting as an agent, a go-between for buyer and seller.

Sometimes Annette twitted him about his lack of ambition, inasmuch as he seemed very contented to remain in the sleepy, piddling cow town where he roomed and boarded at Elkmont's only hotel.

He said, smiling, "You're the most beautiful cook I've ever seen, Annette, with your face all flushed from being near the stove, and— Eum?" sniffing, "don't I smell something burning?"

Annette laughed. "Don't be so darned precise, Claude. I've burned a couple of pies. But what's a pie compared to the fire that's been lighted on our range?"

Ormond moved closer to her. She was standing on the doorsill at floor level, and he had to look up at her. "What do you mean?"

Her words poured out in a gusty rush. "Marr has turned those black bulls on the range, and Daddy Foster has gone to call him, and I'm scared stiff that— Oh!" a sudden joyful lift to her voice. "Yonder he comes now! I guess—I guess, Claude, those two old war horses took it out as usual in a red-hot word battle."

"Another exchange of scurrilous insults?" said Claude Ormond. "They're a joke in Elkmont, those two funny old men. They act so savage and bloodthirsty, but—"

"Don't joke about it, Claude. I'm always afraid one or the other will sometime go savage and bloodthirsty. . . . Now I'm so darned relieved to see Dad riding home that I've let down and I'm sort of all jittery inside."

"Jittery? Well, get out of that kitchen and let's go for a long ride. I've sandwiches and a bottle of coffee rolled up in my coat. Too bad there won't be a gorgeous moon. I'd adore to make love to you on the shore of a quiet lake like mirroring the moonlight."

"Sorry," said Annette, with a mischievous smile over the man's flowery talk. Don Marr either could not or did not "turn it on like that." "No riding for me tonight, Claude, except to ride close herd on Dad. . . . He was so furious today I'm still shaking in my boots."

SHE darted around the young man from town and, graceful as a robin in flight, fled on light feet to the big, red-roofed stable where Jim Foster had reined up his horse. The rifle, she noticed, was now tied on his saddle, and his rage was no longer apparent. On the contrary, his leathery, lined face wore a grim smile of triumph.

"Hi, daughter! Don't look so scared and upset. It's all hunky."

"What's all hunky, Dad?"

" 'Lo Claude. For once I'm glad to see you."

Claude Ormond had followed Annette. "Aren't you always glad to see me, Mr. Foster?" he answered, and his glance at the older man was a very sharp one.

Foster dismounted. "Speakin' plain, I ain't always glad to see a feller like you hangin' 'round my daughter. You don't work enough to make a hit with me, and while I've heard you're a smart business man, it just might be you're one of them fortune-hunters."

"Daddy!" Annette put in, crisply.

"Huh! I ain't pickin' on him—much," the cowman resumed. "Claude savvies I believe in sayin' what I think. But I'm feelin' pretty darned cocky

right now. Feelin' good. By the way, Claude, a rumor got out that you sold the old Nought 9 ranch to a feller named Frank Sheppard. I've met Sheppard. He claims to have bought it, and claims he owns it."

"It's Sheppard's ranch all right," stated Ormond flatly. "I merely handled the transaction. I have no interest at all in the property. If that was what you meant to imply?"

"Well, if you ain't got no interest in Nought 9, there ain't no point in my bringing up what I was goin' to, which was that I seen them hired men Sheppard's got, and I don't like 'em. Gunsnakes! They'd ought to be kicked plumb outa the country."

Annette, who had twice unsuccessfully tried to interrupt, now got in a word. "Dad, how'd it come out? You know what I mean."

Foster tipped back his slouch hat, rubbed his hands together, wriggled his shoulders and grinned like a happy schoolboy. "I was comin' to that, Annie. I called old ripsnorter Marr about them black bulls. Called him proper. And some way his old spunk and fire wasn't in him today. I poured the hard names into him, and then I says, plenty barbed-wire:

" 'If you're goin' to run them black critters, this range ain't big enough for the two of us.'

"He came back, 'I aim to run 'em, Foster. If you don't like it, buy me out.'

"Annie, Claude, lots of times I've tried to get that ornery wolf either to buy me out or sell to me. Never could get a rise outa him. So was I s'prised! I took him up quick, though. I'd buy Cross M if the price was right. The quicker the better, so as to get them damn bulls penned up and then shipped outa the country.

"Well, the price he made was right. . . . No savvy what has got into Marr. . . . String to it was: One-half the value to be in cash delivered to him and put in his hands right on Cross M. Which means I've got to raise forty thousand dollars.

"I told Marr I'd get it. . . . That's why I was glad to see you here, Claude. You've got influence with the moneybags there in Elkmont, and you can help me—I'm not up on them things—in making out the papers and all to mortgage Slash F to get that big wad. Let's ramble to town now. What say?"

Ormond hesitated a moment. Then, "I'll go with you gladly, Mr. Foster. I'll do all that I can to help. . . . See you later this evening, I hope, Annette. . . . Wheeo!" as if the full significance of what was about to happen struck home quite suddenly. "This is a big deal, isn't it? Annette, my dear, you'll be the Cattle Queen of Elkmont County!"

Annette watched the two men ride away, deep lines between her eyebrows. She should have been happy, but she was not. She thought, "Cattle Queen? He's a strange fellow, with his polished talk and his sometimes funny ideas about the range. I don't want to be a cattle queen, and I don't intend to be. And I wish Marr wasn't selling to Dad. I wish there was another way to stop their quarrelling. And I'm so afraid something's terribly haywire. . . . Don! Don Marr! If only you knew how I'm longing for you to come and talk to me!"

CHAPTER II

Masked Men

THAT evening Annette found Curly Bent's presence a comfort, for at this time Curly was the only hired hand on Slash F. He was the kind of fellow everybody liked, yet to whom nobody

paid a great deal of attention; one of those loyal and dependable individuals who'd probably always be just a hired man. Even-tempered and extremely good-natured, Curly got along well with everybody. He even got along fairly well with cantankerous John Clayton Marr.

In the years he had worked for Slash F he had seen Annette blossom until she had become, in his opinion, the very prettiest and nicest girl in all the world. Though he suffered from no illusions as to his own status in her eyes or his own lack of romantic appeal, his loyalty to the girl was so deeply genuine that Annette sometimes found it almost embarrassing.

He understood her moods and never failed to sympathize with her problems. So it was only natural that, almost without realization of it, Annette had taken him into her confidence and had grown to depend on him in the rare little, yet to her apparently enormous, crises of her life.

Particularly had this proved true in her relations with young Don Marr. When both their fathers objected vociferously to the young folks having anything to do with one another, they had found urgent need of a go-between, and who should this be but Curly Bent? Curly hobnobbed with John Marr's punchers, hobnobbed with young Don as well, and although Curly was loyal to Slash F to the Nth degree, Don Marr was his hero. Moreover, Curly allowed secretly that Don was the only fellow he'd ever met who was halfway good enough for lovely Annette Foster.

As was his unvarying custom, Curly whistled while he did the chores, and after supper when he helped Annette with the dishes. Finally, when he was about to go to the bunkhouse, he asked:

"Goin' to wait up for Dad Foster?"

"Why, yes, Curly, of course . . . I don't feel as if I could go to sleep. Suppose I'm just being silly, but——" Her voice trailed off. She knew her mental upset had transmitted itself to the steady hand, and the sympathy in his wind-darkened, honest face was reassuring. Yet this sympathy and this grave concern solved none of her problems.

He said diffidently, "Maybe we can play a few games of cribbage or pitch —if you'd like to . . . And, Annie, Don ain't goin' to let you down."

ANNETTE didn't make an answer to this. She felt that it wasn't a question of Don's "going" to let her down. He had already let her down, and the wound was too fresh and raw for her to speak of it now.

She said uncertainly, "You need your sleep, Curly."

But there was relief in her voice Hearing this, he was lighting the living-room lamp, and in another moment he opened a table drawer and took out a cribbage board and deck of cards.

As a usual thing Annette beat Curly at cribbage or at any other game. Tonight, however, she lost four games in a row, while the cowboy razzed her good-naturedly. Her mind wasn't on the cards, for she was watching the living-room clock. When it struck eleven she sprang up impatiently, moved to the door, opened it and stood listening. Slash F was wrapped in the unbroken silence of night, and hearing nothing, Annette turned.

"Curly, he should be here by now."

"Sure, but——"

"I'm going to ride out to meet him."

Curly's wrinkled-cornered brown eyes opened wide. "Now, please, Annie, get hold of yourself. Nothin' 'd happen to—"

"Will you get my horse?"

Curly shrugged and got up. "Oh, sure. And I'll go 'long with you."

The road to Elkmont wound through foothills, and the night air was pungent with the strong, sweet smell of cedars and pines. Overhead the bright stars seemed so close that one might almost reach up and pluck them from the sky, and Annette found herself looking back to other nights such as this, when she had ridden stirrup to stirrup with big, dark Don Marr. On those nights there had been a nameless, tingling, delightful something lifting her spirits. Tonight there was none of this. 'Twas nice that Curly was with her, but there was no romance about Curly, at least for her, and she so sad, bewildered and apprehensive.

Silly, of course, for she had no definite reason to feel apprehensive. Yet the miles slipped past and still they did not meet Dad Foster along the silent road. Then ahead of the two riders a horse whinnied.

"That's Dad!" Annette cried, and spurred to a lope. "I know old Peck's whinny."

THEY came to old Peck, tied to a scrubby pine beside the trail. Annette drew her own mount to a skidding halt. "Curly! What—"

From the depths of the cluster of pines beyond the horse came a rustling, scraping sound. Curly stepped down from his saddle, prowled back among the trees, and called, "Don't get scairt, Annie. Your dad's here! But he's gagged and snubbed to a pine . . . Oukoo! Here's Claude Ormond, too!"

Annette tried to be calm, practical and efficient. But after all, she had never been confronted with a situation of this kind. Her hands were shaking so badly she had trouble releasing her father and untying the bandana wound around the lower part of his face. It held a wadded bit of rag crowded into his mouth.

Curly meanwhile released Claude Ormond. Hatless and considerably mussed, he came at once close to Annette and put his arm tenderly about her shoulders. "What a shock for you, my dear. I'm so terribly sorry—"

"Never mind my shock! What happened, Claude?"

"We—that is, your father—raised the cash all right," Ormond began. "Although he scoffed at the idea that the ride home might be dangerous, I insisted on accompanying him, for after all he was carrying forty thousand dollars!"

"Yes," Annette cried. "Yes! And what happened?"

Jim Foster, who had been making strange noises as he cleared his throat and mouth, now exploded, "Girl, we got held up! Couple of men hidin' behind masks. But one was the damned old scoundrel, John Marr!"

"Daddy! Don't say— Well, John Marr wouldn't do such a thing."

"Wouldn't he though! That Scotch burr to his voice gave him away. Plumb! Nobody can't fool me on that ol' rapscallion's talk."

Annette felt as numb as if she'd been physically stunned. She drew a deep breath and asked, "Who—who was the second man?"

Jim Foster hunched his shoulders, flexed his numb arms, rubbed his wrists. "I dunno. You got some ideas, Claude?"

"None," said Ormond shortly. "I'm not even sure that one of the crooks was John Marr."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," the girl exclaimed.

CURLY, a dim figure in the background, had coiled the two ropes

with which the men had been tied, and now stood waiting in silence. Ormond, his arms still about Annette's shoulders, queried quickly, "Now why are you glad to hear me say that, my dear? After all the dirt this Marr has done you folks on Slash F, I'd think—"

"Aw, don't bother to think!" Foster cut in savagely. "Marr robbed me. That's that. He and his man snubbed us to these trees. Probably hoped we wouldn't be found till mornin'. Anyhow, they tied my hoss. Claude's bronc got away from 'em and high-tailed back toward town. . . . Curly! Don't just stand there like a hunk of wood. Can't you track them two blasted thieves?"

Curly started. "In the dark, boss? How could I? . . . But at crack of day I'll get on the job."

"Ye-ah, you and the sheriff, both," snorted Foster. "Climb your bronc right now. Go to Elkmont and get Ed Taggart. Tell him what happened, tell him I lost forty thousand dollars. Tell him not to spill it around, though. Less said about it the better. And don't tell him I said John Marr robbed me. Let him figure that out himself—if he's got enough sense. Well, head out, cowboy. Head out!"

"I'm takin' these ropes," drawled Curly. "A rope's a personal sort of thing. They may give us a real lead. How much dough'd you lose, Claude?"

"None," Ormond replied. "I had fifty dollars on me, but apparently the thieves didn't think I was worth searching."

"Didn't take your gun or Dad Foster's either," Curly said musingly. "Maybe 'cause guns are right easy to identify and would give these crooks away if they happened to show 'em months later."

"Are you a range detective, cowboy?" Ormond inquired, and Annette, being very close to him, had the impression that he lifted his eyebrows.

"Uk-unn," Curly denied instantly. "But ol' Timberline Johnson's a whiz at this sort of stuff. First thing that'll occur to Timberline is who tipped off these stink-lizzards? Who the heck ever they may be."

"'Tipped off'?" rumbled Foster, showing marked irritation. "John Marr knew I'd try to get the cash. And that's that!"

"Nuts!" Curly retorted. "I won't believe old cantanker did this job, or had any hand in it, till it's proved. And maybe not then. . . . Steady. Keep your shirt on, Mr. Foster. I'll be amblin' along."

As he moved away, Annette thought, "I can't see John Marr doing a thing like this either." But she did not express the thought.

Ormond called, "Bring back my saddler, Sir Galahad, if you find him, Curly."

"Wheeoo! Some name for a hoss!" ejaculated Curly. "Sure, I'll get him."

THEN the sound of his mount's hoofs on the hard road came back to Annette. She slipped free of Ormond's arm and helped her father out of the underbrush, finding him so exhausted that he leaned heavily against her.

Jim Foster had married very late in life, but somehow until tonight Annette had not thought of him as an old and feeble man, much older than Donald Marr's father. Now, as she heard him mutter, "Uh, I'm kinda used up, daughter; let me sit down a little bit," she all at once realized that he couldn't take the hard knocks any more.

"Yes, Daddy. Sit on this fallen log."

"Thanks. I'll be hunky in a minute. Never thought Marr'd be that doggoned contemptible. Jolt of findin' it out sorta done somethin' to me. Inside me."

"It would," said Annette. "Don't

think I'm not upset, too! Yet perhaps your hurt goes deeper than mine." Oh, no, it didn't. It couldn't go half as deep as the hurt deep inside her! But why mention that? "For after all," she went on quickly, "if you'll be honest with yourself, you must admit that you and John Marr really like each other. All this squabbling and fiery talk has become a habit and is just a smoke screen."

"Huh? 'Smoke screen?'" Foster tipped back his hat and looked up at his daughter standing in the starlight. She was young, vitally alive, and her graceful figure commanded his full attention even more than her words. She saw him grin a bit sheepishly; then he said, "You ain't so dumb, honey."

Neglected and almost forgotten in the background, Ormond put in, "Don't you two old longhorns really hate one another?"

"Sure we do," Foster growled. "Or if we didn't, we do now. Why, doggone that old— Annette, I didn't tell you everything Marr said when I saw him on Cross M today."

Foster broke off, stared into space, and muttered under his breath for a full minute before he resumed. "I called him on them black bulls, you know? I says, plenty snorty, 'You never actually promised not to turn 'em on the range, but I didn't think you'd do me such a dirty trick.'

"He came back savage, 'Jim, I don't expect you to believe me. My own son wouldn't.' He stopped, and his face twisted and he went on, not to me, but to himself, 'My kid believes I lied to him.'

"Naturally, I broke in, 'What's all this?' and added a few insults I happened to think of at the moment.

"Marr said, 'I didn't turn those bulls out of the pasture and scatter 'em on the range. Nor did my men do it.'"

"DADDY," Annette cried almost joyfully, "if John Marr said that you can believe it. . . . Oh! Don didn't believe him. That's—that's— I don't understand it."

"Whether Don believed the old scamp or not, I didn't, and I snorted, 'I suppose you'll tell me they broke out of the pasture?'"

"And what did Marr say, daddy?"

"He said they hadn't broken out of the pasture, that the fence was all up ship-shape, and gates closed, which, he said, showed that somebody had driven out the bulls and closed the gate afterwards."

"Daddy, this thing gets queerer and queerer. . . . Did John Marr then hint that maybe you had put the black bulls on the range yourself—to start a fight?"

"No. He didn't mention that possibility. Humn? No doubt it occurred to him. But, like I've said, Marr wasn't himself. The fight was gone out of him. Doggone! he must have been all broken up or he'd not have offered to sell to me."

Ormond again made his presence known by clearing his throat loudly. "If you'll pardon me, Jim, I might suggest that in the light of what has happened tonight, the man might have been playing a deep game."

Foster's mood had changed and had softened while talking with his daughter. Now all at once he became aggressive and angry once more again. "'Playing a deep game'? I believe you've hit the nail on the head, Claude. Yeh, that stuff about somebody else turning the black critters on the range was poppycock!"

He scrambled to his feet and snapped his fingers. "All poppycock," he repeated. "Marr's made a sucker of me, and damned if he'll get away with it! Neither horses nor men can fly. They

leave tracks, and come daybreak with the sheriff on the job—we'll see what we'll see. . . . Annette, honey, I had to plaster Slash F to the hilt to get that forty thousand dollars. Unless we get it back, we're through."

"Oh, we'll get it back, daddy," comforted Annette, though with no least expectation that the cash would ever be recovered. John Marr had not robbed her father. He wasn't that kind of a man! But the thieves who now had the money would be much too clever to allow themselves to be caught. She went on, "Claude can take your horse; you ride in the saddle on my pony and I'll ride behind you. We'll get you home and to bed."

CHAPTER III

Found on Cross M

CROSS M ranch lay in a wide and fertile valley back-grounded on the west by rugged mountains. A willow-lined stream fed by branches which came down from these mountains led southward along the valley, and on the east bank of the river, near the center of the ranch, squatted John Marr's buildings.

Marr himself, tall, gaunt, with a heavy thatch of iron-grey hair as coarse as a wolf's coat, came out of his house an hour after sunrise and stared in silence at the small cavalcade of riders who had reined up in his yard.

His leathery, aggressive features gave the impression of having been chiseled from rock—a rough job, which had never been polished. His heavy, bristling eyebrows added further evidence of his cantankerous and belligerent nature.

This morning Annette Foster, sizing him up more closely than ever before, thought he looked as if he'd had a bad night; looked, moreover, as if he had a bone to pick with the whole world. His cold eyes roved over his visitors, paused for a moment on Sheriff Taggart's blond, round face with open hostility, and then centered on Jim Foster.

"Did you need to bring a whole party, and even the lawman, wi' you, Foster?" he asked sourly.

"Taggart's got plenty to say to you," Foster bit off a savage reply. "Say it, sheriff!"

John Marr had antagonized Taggart even before the sheriff had been elected, and afterwards this same knotty, outspoken cowman had flouted the lawman's authority on more than one occasion. Accordingly, Annette could scarcely blame Taggart for the triumphant glitter which now flashed in his eyes. He'd been "laying for the old wolf," and now he had him in a corner.

"First," said Taggart, "how many men are there on your place right now?"

"Only two," Marr returned. "Old Timberline and Biff Sloan. They've gone to work a'ready. So if you wanted to see 'em—"

"I did," cut in the sheriff. "Two men and the cook, eh?" He indicated by a gesture a tall, spare, severely plain woman who had come to the kitchen door and was watching the newcomers with open curiosity. "Where's your son?"

Annette saw John Marr's face tighten. He growled, "If it's any of your business, I don't know. . . . Get to it, man. Why the devil are you asking me questions?"

"Eumn?" said Taggart. "You don't know where your son is? Eumn! . . . Curly, Ormond, go to the stable and corrals and look around. You know what to look for, and don't be too long about it."

CURLY BENT and Claude Ormond at once turned their horses and loped away. Annette bit on her lower lip to hold it steady. Yes, indeed they knew what to look for!

Marr's temper boiled over. He glared at Jim Foster, tense with strain, his features a little bit grey under their tan. "Jim, if you came here to buy Cross M, let's get it over with. If you didn't—get off my property, all of you."

"Hold your horses," snapped the sheriff. "Foster isn't here to buy your ranch, although yesterday evening he raised a large sum of cash in Elkmont for that purpose. Then on his way home last night with Claude Ormond, two masked gunmen held them up, robbed Foster, and snubbed both men to trees.

"Foster sent Curly Bent to town to get me, and at daybreak this morning I got on the job. Jim, his daughter and Claude Ormond joined us at the scene of the robbery. . . . Making a long story short, after a difficult search we found horse tracks, made by the same two horses which had left plenty of hoof marks in the vicinity of the actual holdup, and these eventually led us to Cross M ranch. The thieves had taken pains to try to hide their trail, but—" Taggart shrugged and stopped talking.

Marr was staring at the lawman in in what appeared to be utter bewilderment. Annette thought that surely a man of his character could not assume an attitude of such complete surprise. Yet she herself had seen and examined these tell-tale horse tracks, tracks which by devious way led both from Cross M to the scene of the robbery and back again to the ranch.

Nor were these tracks the only evidence to direct suspicion to John Marr. Curly Bent had identified the two ropes with which Foster and Ormond had been tied. As the cowboy had remarked last night, "A rope is a personal sort of thing," and like the great majority of cowhands, Curly always took an interest in another rider's outfit. Not just the man's saddle, but his chaps, bridle, bit, spurs, boots, saddle blanket, gun of course and his rope. Curly could have described in detail any one or all of these articles belonging to Donald Marr for example. This morning after Curly had examined the ropes by daylight he had declared that one belonged to old John Marr and was the saddle rope Marr used. The second rope also belonged on Cross M ranch, an extra to be used by any hand who had none of his own.

NOW, following Taggart's remarks, the silence drew out and tightened, Marr saying no word, no one else speaking until Curly Bent returned on foot from the big, red-hoofed stable. He halted, pushed back his hat, and said to the sheriff, "Cross M's cavvy is still in the corral. The two hosses the thieves used are among the bunch. They show plain signs of havin' been rode last night. Ormond and I have caught those two hosses and looked at their hoofs. Said hoofs match the tracks we have run down, sheriff."

Taggart's eyes were on John Marr, his hand rested on the handle of his six-shooter. "That settles it," he remarked tersely.

"One thing more," Curly resumed bleakly, as if he took neither pleasure nor pride in this coup, "the blankets belongin' to a couple of saddles now racked in the barn are mighty sweaty and still just a little bit warm. I'd say them saddles—one is John Marr's, the other an extra—and blankets, as well as the two horses, was used las' night, sheriff."

Claude Ormond, leading his mount,

Sir Galahad, which Curly had picked up in Elkmont and returned to him, as well as Curly's horse, joined the small group.

The sheriff said meaningly, "I don't suppose you know anything about all this, Mr. Marr?"

"I don't," gritted the old cowman. "So far as I know, nobody rode off this ranch last night."

"I suppose you were in bed and asleep?" Taggart was now openly skeptical.

"I was. From nine o'clock on to five this mornin' . . . The boys, I mean Timberline and Sloan, said nothing to me of going any place."

Foster spoke up. "We can cut Timberline out as a suspect. The man's built like a tall pine and I'd have recognized his figure even on a black night, which last night wasn't. I don't know about Biff Sloan."

"I'll remind you, Foster, that none of us know the whereabouts of young Donald Marr," said the sheriff significantly.

"Jumping to what conclusion?" Marr demanded savagely.

Taggart hunched his shoulders. "I have no search warrant, Mr. Marr, but the situation justifies a search of your person and property."

Annette saw Marr's eyes light and flash. "Have at it," he shot back instantly. "I'll not bar you from searchin' as much as you damned well please, officer, on a red-tape law-technicality. If it's money you're hoping to find, or if you believe my son is hiding about the place, you'll be disappointed. And one of these days, you smark-aleck whippersnapper," stabbing Taggart with hot, rage-inflamed eyes, "you'll be askin' my pardon for—"

"Cut it!" Taggart ordered. "Ormond, watch this man. Curly, you come with me."

He dismounted with a lithe bound.

ANNETE found it impossible to breathe in a normal manner. Cold and hot by turns, she waited with feverish impatience for the search to end. Curly and Taggart disappeared within the main house, and returned much sooner than she had anticipated, with the sheriff holding up for all to see a brown leather wallet—an old worn but well-stuffed wallet. It was her father's. The girl caught her saddle horn to steady herself. Until this moment she had not believed John Marr guilty of this brazen robbery. But now—

She shook off the thought.

Dramatically, Ed Taggart opened the wallet. "It's crammed full of big bills, five hundred and thousand dollar bills," he announced. "Of course I must have Redstone, the banker, identify this cash and state that it is the same money he gave Jim Foster," he concluded, and then placed the wallet carefully in his coat pocket, his hand none too steady.

Meantime Curly had come close to Annette's stirrup. Looking up at her as gloomily as if he'd lost his best friend, he said, "That dough was stuck in under Marr's mattress on his bed. Now what gets me is why didn't he hide it better? Even though he must ha' figured the trail'd never lead to him, he'd try to put it in a less likely place, seems to me."

Annette scarcely heard the loyal hand. For Sheriff Taggart had stepped around in front of John Marr, saying tautly and triumphantly, "You're under arrest, Mr. Marr. We'll pick up your accomplice later, but right now I'll take you to Elkmont. You can do your talking afterward."

Marr answered no word. For once he seemed to have been struck speechless.

CHAPTER IV

"You Can't Run Out on Me!"

AT ELEVEN o'clock of this same morning, Annette Foster lighted a fire in the kitchen stove on Slash F and mechanically began to start a meal. Of the party which had visited Cross M, Curly Bent had gone to find Timberline Johnson; Claude Ormond had said it was imperative that he ride to the 2Z ranch, eight miles south of Cross M, to see the owner, Dell Scarber, on a business matter. Sheriff Taggart and his prisoner had taken the road to Elkmont, followed at a more leisurely pace by Foster and Annette, who had returned to Slash F.

Here Jim Foster had immediately taken to his bed, saying to his daughter, "This rotten business has made me plumb sick. I feel like a mule had let go with both hind feet and hit me right in the belly. . . . You ain't happy neither."

"Oh, I'm miserable, daddy. Of course the money has been recovered so we won't go broke, but—" Tears had choked her voice and blinded her eyes.

Paring potatoes now for the noon meal, she recalled that never in the fourteen years Curly had worked on Slash F had she seen the sawed-off cowboy so dejected, so glum. However, he had promised to report to her after he talked with Bill Sloan and old Timbeline. So when Annette heard a horse approaching, she supposed it was Curly's mount. Not until a tall figure darkened the kitchen doorway did she look up.

The paring knife dropped from her fingers; the pan of potatoes slid off her lap and spilled across the floor. She came to her feet and then stood as if frozen, staring at the tall, big-shouldered, rugged and dark-featured young man who had flipped off his hat and was smiling down at her.

"Don!" she whispered. "Don!"

Donald Marr crossed the room in three steps. He tipped up her head and bent to look into her eyes. "Annette, you've turned white! And you're shaking. Shaking as if you have a chill. I didn't mean to scare you. Gosh, I'm sorry! I only meant to surprise—"

"And is it a surprise!" said Annette, low and huskily, "after what happened last night and this morning!"

"Sit down, dear." He pushed her back into the chair, squatted in front of her and slanted his black-haired head to one side, regarding her with tender solicitude. "Now, what has happened? I've been up on Pole Mountain to get a horse. That wild horse, Annette, that I named 'High Fence'. Remember him? A chestnut pippin. He'd jumped out of the pasture, but I wanted to have that horse to ride—to ride out of the country, Annette."

"And you caught High Fence?" asked the girl, thinking,

THIS IS SILLY TALK WHEN—EVERYTHING'S HAYWIRE

"SURE! I corralled the bunch he was with and got my rope on him." A grin lighted Don Marr's lips, and twinkles danced in his almost black eyes; those same wonderful eyes which had, in the past, always fascinated Annette Foster. "But I had no intention of leaving without saying goodbye to you. And here I am. . . . Glad to see me, partner?"

"Yes. . . . That is, I don't know." She was glad to see him, and her heart and pulses and nerves were simply crazy. But between them now lay a river that could not be bridged.

"You don't know!" Don reached

for her right hand and held it tight. "Annette, what is the matter? Oho! You've heard I had a row with my dad. But now, just because I'll never inherit Cross M, and because I've hit out on my own and I haven't a red cent, that wouldn't turn a girl like you against me."

"Don, did you just come down from the mountains? Just this morning?"

"Yes. I rode around Cross M and—"

"You haven't seen Timberline? Or Curly Bent? You haven't been to town to get the news?"

"Haven't seen Timberline or Curly. Haven't been near Elkmont. . . . Except for a skulking drygulcher who tried to shoot me on Pole Mountain, I haven't seen anybody since I left the ranch afternoon of day before yesterday."

"A drygulcher tried to shoot you, Don! Who was he? Why'd he try to shoot you?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. . . . Dad was in a black temper when we quarrelled, yet he wouldn't set a killer on my trail. I'd never seen this buzzard before. He ambushed me, fired twice without saying one word, and I killed him. Which was unfortunate," Don tried to speak lightly, "when I did want to ask him what was the big idea."

Annette's eyes were wide. She could not help shivering. What if Don had been killed? She didn't want to think of that. "Did his horse tell you anything, Don?" she asked practically.

"I found where he had left his horse. But it had pulled loose and skeedaddled. I never saw it." He spread his hands in a gesture of dismissal. "Mystery: Why did an unknown hard-case try to murder me? . . . But I didn't mean to talk about me. What has upset you so terribly, Annette?"

The girl said all in one breath, "John Marr turned those black bulls on the range and—" She stopped, suddenly recalling things which Jim Foster had belatedly told her at midnight of last night. "Don, did your father tell you he didn't do that?" she asked tautly.

A FLUSH lifted to the young man's forehead; his lean, dark face tightened. "I'd rather not talk about it, Annette."

"Not even to me?"

He shook his head stubbornly, and the silence drew out for thirty seconds before she said gently, "Women have always shared men's troubles. It'll do you good to get this something off your chest, Don. Perhaps, too, I know more than you realize about your quarrel with John Marr."

"Eumn? He'd keep everything bottled up inside him. So how can you know—?"

"But he didn't keep everything bottled up inside him. So how can you believed he had lied to you."

Donald Marr jerked his head back as if cold water had been dashed in his face. "Annette, you and I have agreed that the feud between Cross M and Slash F was uncalled-for, just plain silly, and we had hoped to end it. That hope has now been exploded, and John Clayton Marr's to blame for it."

Annette bent forward and reached out her left hand to rumple Don's black hair as he sat facing her on the floor. "You're admitting he is definitely in the wrong?"

"I'm not dodging the issue. We argued about those darned black bulls, Dad and I, from the day he bought them, and he had promised me he'd keep 'em under fence, his idea being to pick out a hundred-odd Cross M heifers and start a black herd distinctly apart from the Hereford cattle both Cross M and Slash F are now raising.

"At least that's what he said." Don's

voice turned bitter. "What he did was to sneak those Angus bulls out onto the range. I say 'sneak' because he did it in the night, unknown to me or to anybody else. I saw the pasture was empty and, passing over our father-son fight, I'm all through on Cross M and I'm leaving this neck of the woods."

Donald Marr hunched his shoulders and lifted himself easily to his feet. "Darn it all!" he exploded. "If John Marr was any other man I'd stay right here and help Jim Foster and you bring him to time. . . . What has Jim Foster done so far, Annette?"

THE girl was also on her feet. "Don, I can't believe your father broke his word to you, nor yet that he lied. It isn't like him at all, not if he's in his right mind. . . . Now, there's something awfully queer going on on this range, and the more I puzzle about its funny angles the queerer it gets."

"Annette, you're all upset again, and almost unstrung!" the man cried. "What's so darned queer?"

"You'll be worse upset than I am in a minute. You can't leave the country, run out on me, and leave me to fight this thing alone. Well, of course Curly and Claude Ormond are helping me—that is, us Fosters. But it's up to you, Don Marr, to get to the bottom of this, to find out what's haywire!"

Don caught her by both shoulders and spun her around to face him. "Loving you as I now realize I do, Annette. I'll stay and do anything I can—except fight my own father. Now please steady down. Why are you so wrought up?"

Annette's words tumbled over one another as she told the young man everything that had happened during his absence. Concluding her account, she added, "And Sheriff Taggart believes that you helped John Marr to rob my father!"

CHAPTER V

Murder

THIRTY minutes later Don Marr was riding a beautiful, high-lifed and very skittish horse away from Slash F ranch. "High Fence" was a horse in a thousand, a horse no average puncher could have broken to ride, and now that he had been running out with the wild bunch once again for some months, Don had to watch him every moment or he'd find himself holding down a small piece of ground instead of his saddle.

The cowboy was heading to Elkmont to see his father. His parting words to Annette had been, "If he tells me he robbed your dad, I'll believe it. But not before. . . . Keep a stiff upper lip, dear. Something's all haywire, and how! We've got to smoke out that something."

Approximately seven miles along the road, the big chestnut horse gave voice to a snort and whirled right-about-face so quickly he almost lost his rider. Mad clear through, Don used force to bring High Fence round about, and then he saw the reason for the chestnut's violent behavior. Beside the road, partly screened by a bush, lay the body of a man!

Don retreated for fifty yards, snubbed High Fence to a pine, and returned on foot. The body was that of Sheriff Ed Taggart. He had been shot three times in the back at close range, and his holster was empty, which made it look as if the murderer had jerked the weapon free and had killed the lawman with it.

Recalling everything that Annette had said, Don looked for the cash Taggart had been taking back to Elkmont. It was gone. Gone also were the two horses, one of which had been ridden

by the sheriff and the other by John Marr.

Shocked numb by the stark horror of what seemed to have happened here, Don Marr got hold of himself and began to "cut for sign." Timberline Johnson, the old-timer of Cross M, had taught the younger man many things about this art. For Timberline, frontier trapper, army scout, miner and freighter and cowpuncher, had helped to raise Don Marr, and had taken as much pride in the boy as if he'd been his own son.

Don now put to good use the training Timberline had knocked into his head. He was not so expert as the old master, who could—so he claimed—track a moccasin-shod Indian across a black lava bed. But Don was still far, far better than the average cowhand on tracks and reading trail sign.

THE "sign," which was easily found and easily read, indicated that two horsemen, John Marr and the sheriff, of course, had come riding slowly along the road, heading toward Elkmont. At a point thirty-odd feet from where Taggart's body lay, the horse tracks showed that something had happened. Presumably, Marr had snatched the sheriff's six-shooter and had opened fire. Thereupon Taggart's horse had lunged ahead and Taggart had fallen from his saddle, and after running onward for a short distance, his mount had stopped. Apparently, the man who was riding the other horse—and it must have been John Marr—had caught Taggart's horse without dismounting, and had continued along the road.

Considering, however, that the wallet was missing, Don searched for footprints near Taggart's body, and he scratched his head with baffled chagrin. Probably old Timberline could tell in a few moments whether or not there were such marks. But Don was stumped.

Following the plain tracks left by the two horses, he moved on along the road to a point where they turned left off the trail to the north, thus leading into the rough and wooded trackless hills. Realizing it would be almost impossible to follow this sign on horseback, Don continued to work on foot.

Within a quarter of a mile he found where the two horses had topped out out on a windswept, rocky ridge. But there he lost the trail. It was two full hours later when he picked it up again. This he had accomplished by circling in ever-widening circles the point where all trace of the hoof marks had apparently vanished.

At least a mile south of the main road he cross-cut that same pair of horse tracks, and this time the hoof marks were pointing south by west. Too highly keyed to feel either hunger or weariness, Don continued to trail the horses. Three different times he lost the trail again, yet succeeded in finding it each time, before at last he saw that the two horses were definitely heading into the Nought 9 ranch.

And that, Don thought, was most peculiar, if John Marr had killed Taggart and if John Marr had been acting of his own free will in making this ride. For so far as Don knew, his father wasn't acquainted with Sheppard, the man who had recently bought the Nought 9.

DON had never met Frank Sheppard either. The ranch was just a two-bit spread, hidden away among the hills, and pretty well isolated, and when he had heard of the deal, Don had wondered how anybody expected to make a living from it.

Suddenly aware that his feet were hot and swollen and terribly sore, Don

climbed a ridge to the east of the ranch buildings to have a look-see before showing himself openly. The summer afternoon was almost gone, and the slanting sun rays were in his eyes as he paused at the edge of cedars and gazed into the narrow gulch below him.

There was a solidly-built log cabin standing some thirty yards from a heavy thicket of pines, and below the cabin, farther down along the small creek, was a tumbledown shed and a new corral. Two saddled horses were tied to this corral, and still farther downstream were a dozen more loose horses. The smell of wood smoke lifting from the cabin's stovepipe came up to greet Don, and the same vagrant wind which carried the smoke brought the aroma of coffee and hot bread and sizzling steaks.

Don crinkled his nose. Gosh! but he was hungry. But grub must wait until— His gaze came back to the horses tied at the corral and his eyebrows came down to meet over his straight nose. Even at this distance and with the sun in his eyes, there was no mistaking the beautiful black horse. It was Claude Ormond's classy mount, Sir Galahad!

What was Claude Ormond doing here at Nought 9? OH! It was probably on business, since he was the agent who had sold Frank Sheppard the property. Don had met Ormond, as was natural when both men were actively courting the same girl, though with Ormond having a definite edge because he could visit Foster's Slash F openly and freely.

Yes, Ormond had had a definite edge in that respect. But— Don's swiftly shifting thoughts leaped back to the dance of two brief weeks ago in Elkmont. At this dance it had seemed plain both to Don and to Claude Ormond, particularly plain to Ormond, that Don Marr was riding top horse with the bonny girl of Slash F. Furthermore, Claude Ormond had shown Don he was pretty sultry about it.

A smile lighted the young cowboy's somber face. Thinking of Ormond and of Annette, he had almost forgotten his immediate problem, a problem both horrifying and frightening. He couldn't believe his own father had shot Sheriff Taggart, but as yet he had no proof to the contrary. However, those two horses heading into this Nought 9 ranch didn't look right at all; and proof of what was to be found down there in the gulch. Safest and wisest to wait until full dark; then Don would—

THERE came a rustle of movement behind him. He thought at first it was merely a squirrel or a blue jay, but the rustle became the distinct sound of a footstep, and as Don pivoted, snaking out his .45, a voice rapped:

"Drop it!"

Don's amazed eyes snapped wide open. Two men confronted him, one with a rifle, the other with a Colt, both weapons cocked and ready to be fired. He might, by a freakish chance, drop one, but not both. His hand opened and his weapon plunked to the ground.

Sizing up his captors, he reckoned no argument he could make would get far with them. One was a dish-faced, wicked-eyed runt; the other, burly, with hunched-forward shoulders and a brutal face with a white scare from left temple to the point of his chin. Strangers to Don, but gun-hands of the same stripe as the dry gulcher with whom he had tangled on Pole Mountain.

They exchanged quick, slant-eyed glances, and Dishface said, "The boss had the right hunch when he ordered one or t'other of us to keep a lookout all-a-time."

"Yeh. . . . You tie him. Then we'll prod him down to the shack."

CHAPTER VI

"I Killed Taggart!"

ANNETTE FOSTER often thought light in summer the most beautiful time of day. But in July the mosquitoes and the gnats made life miserable for man and beast at this lovely hour. This evening, however, she forgot the buzzing, biting mosquitoes as Curly Bent dashed into the yard and reined up at the kitchen door.

"What's new on Cross M, Curly? I've been expecting you home for hours," wiping her hands on her apron, for she had been making biscuits for supper. "Dad's feeling some better, and is out puttering at the chores."

Curly slouched sideways in his saddle and curled one leg around his saddle horn and jingled a spur rowel with his fingers. "Then he felt pretty bad?"

"Did he! He got a mental upset even worse than mine. . . . Curly, you realize this just as well as Don and I realize it: Those two cantankerous old-timers don't really hate one another."

Curly's pleasing grin flashed. "Sure not! But do they get a kick outa fightin' and cussin' one another out!"

"And now—now that something terribly serious has come up, Daddy's down, sunk." Annette looked up quickly and smiled and blushed. "Don's been here, Curly."

"Uh? He know anything about the funny business?"

"No. And I'm sure he was telling me the truth. He was up on Pole Mountain to get his chestnut horse and—But where have you been all day?"

"Cross M mostly. Workin' with old Timberline. Annette, that long, hungry ol' hairpin is the doggonedest—"

" 'Working with Timberline'? What do you mean?"

"We-ell, when I told Timberline what had come up, he plumb blew his top. There was a nigger in the sticks and he'd smoke out the nigger. Timberline was so dead sure old John Marr had been framed, he convinced me it could be that way. And right off he began cuttin' for sign. I tagged along, doin' no good a-tall, while he prowled like one of them bird dogs. Ye-ah, he even smelt of the grass and bushes. He insisted we work afoot, sayin' a tracker couldn't do nothin' quintin' down at the ground from a horse's back."

Annette was tiptoe with eagerness. "What did Timberline find? What more than we found?"

"The darned ol' cuss wouldn't tell me. Said he wasn't talkin' till he was double dead sure he'd got the polecat scent."

Annette laughed shortly. "Did he say he'd gotten a whiff of it, Curly?"

"WELL," and Curly grinned, "he allowed the whole thing was skunkish He said the first hint was when the Angus bulls got out of the pasture without anybody on Cross M knowing how come."

" 'Without anybody on Cross M knowing how come'?" Annette repeated.

Curly nodded. "Timberline was plenty sore because Don lit out without talking to him. He told me he reckoned the kid flew off the handle and jumped to conclusions that weren't so a-tall."

"Curly, if John Marr is the victim of a frameup, and if you worked with Timberline all day, you must have learned something to help us."

"Can't say I did," answered the cowboy. "Usin' my own hoofs to get around on, I petered out pretty quick, and I ambled to the Cross M house. There I mixed up a feed for me and Biff Sloan. Afterwards I tried to find Timberline and couldn't, then I had to come

home to get at the chores. . . . What's new here? Where'd Don go? Your dad order him off the place?"

"I wish I knew what Timberline has accomplished. . . . Don? Oh, he went to Elkmont to help his father. Of course he would, even if they did fight. . . . Dad was asleep, didn't see him to tell him to get out. . . . Don'll be back soon, I hope! Well, supper's ready, Curly."

Supper was over and full darkness had been a half hour on the land when Annette heard a horse coming. "Don!" she thought, and ran out into the yard. Disappointment lanced through her as Claude Ormond's Sir Galahad loomed and Ormond's well-modulated voice called, "Hello, my dear, troubled girl. Glad to see me?"

"Yes, Claude, of course. What can you tell us?"

Curly, finishing the dish-wiping, stepped to the lighted door behind Annette. Thereupon Ormond threw him a nod and ordered, "Get Annette's horse for her, will you, cowboy?"

"And mine too?" asked Curly pointedly.

Ormond laughed lightly. "Do we need a chaperon? No, Curly; I can take care of her."

Curly slouched off toward the stable.

"Where are we going, Claude?" Annette asked eagerly. "I can tell by a certain excitement in your eyes you've got something important to show me or tell me."

"Suppose we keep where we're going secret for now," countered Ormond, "and not get Dad Foster and Curly all worked up about it. . . . Yes, it is big and important, my dear. You will ride with me, of course?"

"Surely. Just a minute till I get a jacket—and tell Daddy I'm going for a ride with you. Make it sound as if it's the truth."

WHEN the girl was mounted, Ormond started along the road to Elkmont. But once the Slash F was left behind, he turned right, heading in a southeasterly direction across the hills.

"Well, what is it, Claude?" Annette impatiently broke the silence.

The man looked at her profile, and then looked away and sighed deeply. "I hardly know how to begin," he said. "You see, I am in a difficult position."

"You're in a difficult position!" Annette flashed. "Why? Darn it all, Claude, don't be so mysterious! Where'd you go after leaving Cross M this morning? And—"

"A good place to begin," Ormond interrupted. "I rode to the 2 Z, south of Cross M along the foot of the mountains. I talked business with Dell Scarber and had dinner with him. Then, this evening, I cut across country toward Elkmont. This trail led me past the Nought 9, which, as you know, was recently purchased by Frank Sheppard."

"Yes," said Annette, making no attempt to hide her impatience.

With the coming of night had come also a hint of impending rain, and now clouds were scudding across the sky and beginning to gather in ominous fashion. A cold little wind rippled the scarf around her throat, and brought with it the smell of lush grass from Slash F's wide meadows, as well as the redolence of cedars and pines.

The plodding horses' hoofs rustled the sage and the vast lonely silence of the rangeland seemed to wrap itself around the two riders moving across its dark emptiness.

Claude Ormond drew a deep breath "Annette dear, this is going to shock you. I'm terribly sorry, and I still can't believe it myself. I am in a difficult position because you, more than

any other person, know that Don Marr and I didn't like one another any too much. But in spite of that, I want to assure you that I am fair. I won't condemn any man without irrefutable proof."

ANNETTE said very sharply, "Stop talking like a book. Already I've been numbed and sickened by what has happened. But just seeing Don Marr today pepped me up. Hearing Don say that no matter how black it looked for his father, he was sure that old John Marr was innocent, and sure that things would yet come out all right, brought back my courage. . . . Now, let's have the socking part of your story."

Ormond's left stirrup squeaked as he shifted in his saddle, gazing intently at her profile. Gazing intently and very thoughtfully. "You saw Don today? At what time today?"

"At what time? Does that matter? It was noon. But although Don must have been half starved, he didn't stop for dinner. He took the road to Elkmont to see his father."

"Noon, um?" said Ormond. "Where'd Don say he'd come from?"

"Straight from Pole Mountain. . . . Claude, have you any reason for asking—"

"Please, Annette, be patient. I do have reasons for these rather personal questions. The major reason, my sincere desire to help Don Marr."

Annette twisted in her saddle so quickly she almost wrenched her back. "Is Don in a jam?"

"I'm afraid— Well, it's not so serious but what I'm sure we'll get everything straightened out. When I arrived at Nought 9 this evening Frank Sheppard was just riding in—with Don as his prisoner."

"Claude, are you kidding? That's ridiculous."

He answered tautly, "The sad, the tragic part of it all is that I am telling the truth. This Sheppard is an ungainly, rather stupid fellow, but his story—"

"Why would Sheppard capture Don, and why would he take him to Nought 9? Claude, it doesn't make sense." Annette was aware she was showing how provoked she felt; showing something else as well—and to Don's rival at that—her very deeply-rooted interest in Donald Marr. She had lifted her bridle hand, but Ormond urged Sir Galahad onward and Annette's mount forged up alongside once again.

"We'll soon be at Nought 9," said Ormond. "Consequently, I'll let Sheppard tell you what he told me. . . . In replying to Sheppard I told him flatly to hold his horses and that I would bring you, Annette, to see him and Don and we'd then have Don tell his side of it in his own way."

"What is all this!" Annette cried. "Let's ride faster, man. Faster!"

AS THEY spurred to a furious lope, Ormond called, "Dear girl, I must warn you that the horrifying shock is yet to come. Be prepared for it. But of course I'm pulling for you and Don. I sincerely believe he is innocent."

"Innocent of what?"

The girl's question went unanswered. The horses had dipped into a gulch which led to the narrow valley wherein lay Nought 9. Coming out of this side gulch, they turned right and halted in an open space lying between pines and a brightly illuminated cabin.

. Frank Sheppard, tall, angular, slouchy in appearance, and with what Curly Bent would have called a "peanut head" stood at the open door. Behind him in the main room of the shack Annette caught a glimpse of three other figures, one of which was Don Marr. Don, hatless and gunless, seated on a

nail keg, with his hands tied together behind his back.

Her feet touched the ground, and she was crowding past Frank Sheppard before Claude Ormond had dismounted.

"Don! What does this mean?" Her hot, bright eyes shifted to a burly, hunch-shouldered individual with a white scar on his brutal face, who was calmly washing the supper dishes. Then her gaze went to a medium-sized fellow who appeared to be nothing more or less than the average hired man, and came back to Don. He tried to smile at her, but there was no lightness or gaiety in his face or eyes. He looked angry, baffled and in actual misery.

Sheppard had stepped outside. Although Annette could distinguish no word of the conversation, she caught the sound of Claude Ormond's voice speaking to the rancher before the two men came into the room. Annette's eyes were shooting sparks as she turned to face them.

"Well?" she demanded.

Claude Ormond said quickly, "Frank, you tell Miss Foster what you told me. How you were riding home from Elkmont, and shortly after noon, somewhere about one o'clock, you saw Sheriff Taggart's body lying beside the road. How you saw Don Marr attempting to brush away certain footprints —or other sign—near the body, with a pine branch. And you saw young Don Marr's chestnut tied some fifty yards farther back along the road. . . . Go ahead with it, Frank."

Annette felt as if her knees had turned to butter. She put one hand on the table to gain support, and opened her lips; but no sound passed them.

SHEPPARD, apparently ill at ease, and refusing to meet her eyes, muttered, "Er-um. Struck me right off as Don Marr was actin' awful s'picious, and when I come in closer and seen Taggart had been shot dead— Well, I cracked down on Don with my lead-thrower. . . . He was so intent on what he was doin', I got the drop afore he seen me.

"I asked some right pointed questions. He jus' buttoned his lip and kept it buttoned. So, not messin' around none to interfere with the sign near the body, I walked Don to his horse, got him in the saddle and brought him here."

"Why'd you bring him here?" Annette heard herself ask, her mind whirling, whirling.

Sheppard hitched up his sloppy overalls. "Well, with it lookin' like Don Marr had killed the lawman, I figured I'd get a couple of my men to go back there with me and look things over and help me take Don to town. If that was what we decided we had ought to do."

This line of reasoning didn't make a great deal of sense to Annette. Claude Ormond had placed himself beside her as if in the role of protector, and with a great effort she pulled herself together. "Mr. Sheppard," she said, "look me in the eyes. Did you see anything of old John Marr? Of his horse, or the sheriff's horse?"

"No'm, I didn't. . . . I hadn't been home long when Claude Ormond come, and I was mighty relieved, 'cause I'm only a kinder dumb, honest rancher, and Ormond'd know what to do."

Ormond put in, "Don refused to talk even to me, Annette. But after I'd listened to Frank Sheppard's story I immediately decided to bring you to this ranch, and then ask Don to explain. It's something I'm sure he can do both to your satisfaction and to mine. . . . Before he begins, however, I want to emphasize that Sheppard knew nothing whatever about the arrest of John Marr and that Sheriff Taggart was taking

Marr to Elkmont."

Sheppard threw up his head. "So that was it! I sure was puzzled to figure any motive for Don to shoot Taggart. But now— Golly!"

Offering no comment, Don glared at the rancher as if he'd enjoy strangling him. Ormond said smoothly, "Ready to talk, Don?"

"Please do, Don, and clear up the unpleasant situation," implored Annette.

She watched the young man throw a glance at the closed door leading into the second room of this cabin, and saw his expression change from raw, cold anger to one of bitter frustration.

"I wish you hadn't come, Annette," he began in a flat, toneless voice. "But to get it over with: I killed Taggart!"

CHAPTER VII

Timberline Johnson

ANNETTE swayed dizzily. She would have fallen had not Ormond's right arm supported her. As if experiencing a nightmare, she heard Don Marr go on implacably in that same flat, bitter voice:

"My father took the cash Taggart was carrying. He took the sheriff's horse as well as his own and headed for a new range. . . . That's all, Annette."

"Then, Don," she choked, "considering the time element, you must have done that before you came to see me. Before noon. And at that time you seemed so genuinely surprised when I told you about—about—"

Don broke in roughly, "Let's not bring that up." His eyes had turned coal black and glowed like balls of fire. His rugged face was as tight as a drum. "Ormond, get her out of here! Take her home!"

"I certainly will take her home," said Ormond, a strangely exultant ring in his voice. "I'd hoped—Annette knows what I had hoped. But it's no use now. Now that you have confessed in the presence of witnesses, Don Marr. . . . Eumn? Frank, have these two men of yours take the killer to Elkmont and report to the mayor. He'll attend to having a peace officer appointed temporarily to fill Taggart's place.

"By the way, you two fellows, Scar and Hubbend, be sure you get Don locked safely in jail. Tell the mayor to have someone—a posse perhaps—get on John Marr's trail at once! I may get to Elkmont yet tonight, and Shepperd will come in tomorrow to report what he knows. . . . Annette dear, if you're able to ride, we'll go."

Without being conscious of physical movement Annette went out and mounted her horse. Sheppard and Scar remained in the cabin with Don. Hubbend hurried to the corral and returned in a very few moments with three saddled horses, one of them Don's superb chestnut, "High Fence."

Ormond said, "Come, come, Annette, let's get away from here. I'm so sick about the affair I don't want to watch those fellows put Don on his horse," and catching the bridle of Annette's horse he led it away into the darkness.

THE threat of storm had become pronounced, scattered raindrops already falling. It wasn't cold, yet Annette was shivering as if she were half frozen. Her heart was completly frozen.

As if his deepest sympathy was centered on the stricken girl, Claude Ormond made no attempt to break in on her thoughts. Thus four miles of the homeward trail had been gone over in

silence before he said gently, "I'll do everything in my power to see that the money is recovered, my dear."

"The money! Daddy's money!" Annette's laugh was almost hysterical. "I'd forgotten all about it. . . . Money doesn't seem at all important any more. But of course it is. . . . Claude, I've been trying to think things through rationally."

"Don't try to think or reason now. All has been so shocking for you. Just relax and try to forget Donald Marr."

"I'll never forget him! . . . Claude, there are some things about this horrible business that don't make sense."

"A woman's reasoning leaves a man baffled," murmured Ormond. "However, surely you realize that practically every point of the robbery plot has now been cleared up. There is no longer any mystery whatever—"

"Oh, but there is!" Annette broke in. "To me, certain angles are now more mystifying than ever. For example—"

"Please, let me put your ideas on the right track," interrupted Ormond quickly. "Here's the way I see it: The Marrs, father and son, concocted a scheme to bankrupt Jim Foster. We now know how this scheme was put over. Unfortunately for the two tricky thieves who robbed Foster, horse tracks gave them away. But Donald Marr, hiding on Cross M, witnessed the arrest of his father and saw Sheriff Taggart start for Elkhorn with his prisoner and the cash.

"Knowing the original plan had gone haywire, Don intercepted the lawman and murdered him. At this point it was a foregone conclusion that old man Marr must make himself hard to find. Donald Marr, however, firmly believed that he himself was in the clear. No doubt he expected to return to Cross M and take charge of the outfit. Foster of course would still be responsible for the stolen cash, and therefore on the rocks."

ANNETTE, who had listened attentively yet impatiently, put in a word. "But, Claude, when Don came to Slash F at noon today, he had just returned from Pole Mountain, where he'd been all night. His bewilderment when I told him what had happened was so genuine that—"

Ormond snapped his fingers. "He was merely acting out his part! Don came to see you in an attempt to create an alibi for himself for the time of the original robbery. Do you suppose he can call a witness to prove he was on Pole Mountain? I don't."

"Humn?" mused Annette miserably. "The men who work on Cross M, Timberline Johnson and Biff Sloan, probably know that the chestnut horse Don calls High Fence had jumped out of the pasture and was running with a wild bunch on Pole Mountain. The very fact that Don now has that horse does prove he was out after him and not at home or near home.

"One human witness did see Don on the mountain, too. But— Claude, why—why should anyone have tried to drygulch Don? Yet this man did try it. And Don killed the fellow in self-defense. It was someone he'd never seen before."

Breaking off, Annette looked intently at Ormond, and saw that his handsome face was unnaturally harsh and cold. The cords in his neck and his lips were tight drawn—as if he was savagely angry.

After a moment she said, "You—you don't believe it? You think there was no such person?"

"All wild imagination, Annette. And please think no more about it. . . . Donald Marr put on an act to hood-

wink you. Afterwards, as he rode toward Elkmont, he noticed he had left footprints at the scene of his crime, and he was caught in the act of trying to obliterate those footprints and other signs. To his undoing, Fate had stepped in. Fate in the form of a stupid rancher named Frank Sheppard.

"Realizing he had been caught almost red-handed and had no remote chance of clearing himself, tonight at Sheppard's ranch Donald Marr decided to make a clean breast of his guilt. . . . I'm terribly sorry, Annette dear, that he is guilty. But aren't you really glad you found out before it was too late what sort of man he is?"

Annette murmured wearily, "It seems as if you're right, Claude; but—Oh, someone's coming our way. Fast."

A horseman riding at a furious clip materialized against the cloudy skyline. He proved to be an unusually tall man, wearing a high-peaked black hat which further accentuated his great height and made him a marked man even in the rain-spattered darkness.

"Timberline Johnson!" Annette cried, and for some reason felt her low spirits lift at sight of this old hand from Cross M. Of late she had seen little of Timberline, but all through her childhood she had known the ex-scout quite well, and with young Donald she had often been entertained and thrilled by his hair-raising stories of adventure on the frontier.

EVEN though Timberline worked for John Marr, and was as loyal to him as Curly Bent was to Annette Foster, the girl knew Timberline was "a plumb good old scout."

The tall man, having sighted the two riders, had abruptly halted. "Who is it?" His challenge was gruff and terse.

Ormond replied instantly, "Claude Ormond and Miss Foster."

"Let me hear the girl speak."

"Suspicious, isn't he?" commented Ormond. "Always did impress me as a stupid old fool. A bag of wind!"

"It's all right, Timberline," Annette called. "And are we glad to see you!"

Timberline sent his horse plunging forward and again pulled up short. Annette smelled the horse's rank sweat, heard its heavy panting breath, and the man wasted no words in greetings.

"Sure glad I ran into you, Ormond," he began. "Right now I can use a good man. Didn't figure I had time to get to Slash F for help. Not after I found Taggart's body and him shot in the back three times. . . . Annette, you fog home, get Curly and your dad to flag their kites to Nought 9 ranch, pronto. Ormond, side me."

He started to spur around the two other horses when Ormond's sharp voice lashed out and stopped him. "Hold it, fellow! Hold it! As you cowpunchers say, 'What's eatin' on you'?"

"We'll chinwag as we ride. Come on!" rapped the lanky old-timer. "Annette better hear this, too. Then she can turn back. I'm scairt stiff I won't be in time."

Ormond reached out and caught the man's bridle. "In time for what, you old—?"

"Have I got to draw a picture for you! Listen: This mornin' Curly told me what happened—Foster robbed, the sheriff grabbin' ol' John and a wad o' dough hid in Cross M house. I cut for sign. 'Twan't easy. Yet after a long time I cut the snakes' trail.

"Two human coyotes come to Cross M, hid their hosses in willows, got Cross M hosses and saddles, rode to stick up you and Foster, Ormond. They done it. Rode back again to Cross M. They covered this double trail like they didn't want it found, but *so it would be found.*

Planted the boodle in Marr's bedroom, they did. Got their own broncs and headed out. And was they real careful to hide *these* tracks, both goin' and comin'!

"Cuttin' it short, them two snake-eyed polecats come from Nought 9 and went back there again. On foot I tracked 'em that far and had my look-see. A sentry was posted there at Nought 9. Sheppard and two other men was messin' around, doin' nothin'.

"I sunk out without 'em seein' me, hoofed it as the crow flies to Elkmont to get Taggart and old John, 'cause when I told Taggart what I knowed he'd sure let my boss go free."

ANNETTE, listening wide-eyed, interrupted the rapid stream of Timberline's words. "What time were you at Nought 9, Timberline?"

"Middle of the afternoon. Why? . . . Goin' on: Taggart wasn't in Elkmont, nor ol' John. Nobody had seen 'em. Struck me I had to get the lawman, for nobody else would do to take care of this hell-hatched scheme. I waited an' waited, gettin' frettier every minute.

"Come night and still no Taggart. I got me a hoss at the livery, headed out on the road to Slash F. Maybe Taggart had stopped there. Anyhow, I'd get Curly and Jim Foster. Then, b'gad, I come spang onto Taggart's body aside the road. Him shot in the back and dead for hours. No sign of his hoss, nor of ol' John's neither.

"All at once I put two and two together, and the cold sweat broke out like smallpox rash. I knowed what had happened. I just plain *knowed* it! And I headed crow-flight to Nought 9. Let's go, Ormond. Let's go!"

Ormond's hand tightened on Timberline's bridle, and Annette cried, "What had happened, Timberline?"

"Them two-timin' snakes on Nought 9 had beefed Taggart, makin' it appear like ol' John done the job and lit out with both hosses. But really them cusses took ol' John with 'em. Chances is a thousand to one he's been kilt and planted a'ready. But—"

Claude Ormond cut in, "Look here, you!" he snapped. "How from merely finding the dead sheriff could you make any deduction and reach any such astounding conclusion? It's ridic—"

"'Tain't neither ridiculous! Dang it, man! When it come over me I figured I hadn't time to go to Slash F even. 'Twas puttin' two and two together. That simple. Listen: Two coyotes on Nought 9 framed ol' John for robbin' Foster. That I knowed. To make the frame-up stick, they left the dough on Cross M. That had me bothered plenty. I couldn't figure the angle. Sure they must have wanted the dough, and bad. Thieves always do.

"But not until I seen Taggart had been beefed did I see through the double-barrelled scheme. Them lousy crooks had figured ahead of time how they'd stick the frame-up on ol' John and still get the dough. Get it easy! Taggart was mighty nigh sure to take ol' John and the cash to town. The crooks'd waylay 'em. Which they done.

"The rest of their plan—if I gotta waste time sketchin' it for a danged chump tenderfoot named Claude Ormond—was clever and snakish and nigh fool-proof. Fool-proof 'cause them devils is smarter'n hell at hidin' horse tracks. I know. The plan was for ol' John to plain disappear, and the thing everybody is to believe is that he drilled Taggart and lit a shuck. And you can bet your last chaw o' tobacco, ol' John was never to be seen alive again, nor his hoss, nor Taggart's.

"But the joker in them crooks' deck is me. I know that because they pulled

the first frame-up trick they likewise pulled this second hell-born one. . . . If you ain't sidin' me, Ormond, let go my bridle and get outa my way. Chances are I'll be too late now to save ol' John's life, but b'gad I'll send the men who kilt him to hell!"

ANNETTE'S brain had been racing. She had made deductions and had reached the same conclusions as Timberline long before he had fully explained the reason for his belief that John Marr had been taken to Nought 9.

Nor was this all. Timberline's idea of what had actually happened, coupled with her own recent bewildering and numbing experience there at the Nought 9 ranchhouse, called for another deduction and conclusion. The thought which now came to her lifted her spirits, giving her new life, new hope. Donald Marr had not murdered Taggart! Neither of the Marrs was guilty of any crooked work!

In some manner as yet unexplained Don had run foul of Sheppard and his gunhawks and— She heard Claude Ormond saying heatedly, and yet skeptically mocking:

"With all due respect to an old Indian Scout, Timberline, I must point out you're jumping to conclusions. You're all wet, and I'll tell you why. Donald Marr, the old man's son, has confessed to murdering Sheriff Tag-

Timberline, who'd been literally champing the bit, stiffened in his saddle. "Don? How'd he get in on this tricky deal? . . . Where is he now Don't stop to give me details. *Where is Don?*"

"At Nought 9" Annette cried. "And now I see at last why he said he'd shot Taggart. It was because—"

Claude Ormond's voice lifted to smother her words. "Damn a man with a stubborn, one-track mind! . . . Old-timer, I see you've got to hear it from Don's lips before you'll believe it. So get going to Nought 9. I'll be with you in a minute." He released his grip on Timberline's bridle and immediately caught Annette's mount by its head-stall.

"Just a minute, Annette. You're to go home. But I must say something to you first."

Timberline had rapped out, "Don at Nought 9! That right, Annette?"

"That's right. But—"

The old hand snapped, "Come a-hellin', Ormond!" And his spur-goaded horse left the vicinity as if shot from a gun. Over his shoulder his words drifted back, "I hope to God we're not too late!"

BADLY shaken once again, Annette faced Claude Ormond in the misty darkness. "If you won't let me go, Claude," she said wildly, "go with him yourself! Don't you see— You must see now that Don lied to us there in that cabin because he was helpless. Because Sheppard and his horrible men had told him he must say what he did say or they'd kill his father!"

"Annette, my dear, dear girl, calm yourself! Don's father isn't there. He wasn't there. He hasn't at any time been there on Nought 9. How I wish we hadn't met that crazy old Timerline. His story doesn't hold water. The basis for his wild idea that someone from Sheppard's ranch murdered Taggart is so absurd no one can possibly believe it."

The girl didn't answer. She was staring at the man and wondering why he was trying so hard to convince her that Timberline's conclusions were far-fetched and false. All those earlier little inconsistencies which she had found so hard to accept on this night's adventure were in her mind, and a growing suspicion was beginning to

dawn there as well.

"Regrettable and painful though it is for both of us," Ormond resumed, his tone now smoothly placating, "the plain ugly facts are that Sheppard caught Don practically red-handed and that Don confessed the crime. Don't forget the two Mars did rob your own father, Annette. I was with him when it happened, and although I have been reluctant to damn anyone, I can and will take oath that the two masked hold-up men were John Marr and his son."

"You will swear to that?" asked Annette in a very uncertain, shaky voice.

"Yes. And any testimony this Timberline can give on the witness stand—all this fol-de-rol about his finding horse tracks—won't stand up. You must remember, Annette, that Timberline is on Marr's side in this trouble. He wears the Cross M brand. His loyalty to the Marrs may be commendable, for I believe he'd lie, steal, cheat and perhaps kill for his employer and Don."

"Yes, I think—I'm sure he would do anything for Don and his father," said Annette.

"Exactly!" Ormond ejaculated triumphantly, as if certain he had scored a point. "He has made a fantastic attempt to divert suspicion from both father and son. I saw through it at once. And he almost sold you the idea. That was why I simply had to have a few words alone with you before you went back home."

ORMOND bent toward the girl, and she had the uncomfortable feeling that his eyes penetrated the gloom to look right through her. "Now I am asking you, Annette, to trust my judgment fully in this. Let me handle in my own way the touchy situation on Nought 9 which is sure to develop when Timberline storms in there."

"He'll be there long before you can possibly get there," Annette began.

"No. Sir Galahad can easily overtake his logey mount! And I'll prevent the old fool from doing anything silly. But you, because I love you, because your safety and happiness mean all the world to me, must not take chances of running into the grave danger of a possible gun fight.

"So you see you must go straight home. But when you get there, don't upset either your father or Curly. Don't, please don't, I implore you, say anything to them about any of this. At least until I come. You'll promise, won't you?"

The suspicion which had earlier dawned in her mind had grown to enormous proportions, and the idea now dominating Annette's mind was so overwhelming that she could not have spoken had she wished. Doubtless it was well for her that Claude Ormond took her silence to mean assent.

Releasing her horse's bridle, he said, "Sit tight until I come, dear. I won't be long. But now I must hurry. I must hurry."

Then, like Timberline's mount, Ormond's Sir Galahad vanished in the night, running at full speed, and only a few seconds later Annette Foster followed. Ormond hoped and believed that he still had her hoodwinked, and so believing he had left her free to go home. But she simply didn't dare take the time to ride to Slash F. Timberline's life was at stake, and so were Don's and John Marr's. But—a sob caught in her tight throat—it was probable she'd be much, much too late to save either the man she loved or his father.

It was useless for her to cut across country in an attempt to intercept Sheppard's men, who had been charged to take Don to Elkmont. Until she had lost faith in Claude Ormond, she

had supposed they would do this and would actually put him behind bars. How blind she had been. How stupid not to realize much sooner that Ormond and Sheppard could not allow Don to tell his story in town—to tell the truth!

She pressed spurs to her staunch pony, forging on through the dark night. While she was yet a mile, however, from Nought 9, the ominous sound of rifle and pistol shots whipped across the hills.

CHAPTER VIII

"Wolf? Wolf?"

IT WAS with inward relief that Don Marr had seen the girl he loved leave the cabin where he was held a prisoner on Nought 9 ranch. At least she was now safely out of the bear trap in which he had been caught, and so long as Claude Ormond succeeded in keeping her hoodwinked she would be in no danger. Nor was it at all likely she ever would learn the truth. Ormond—what a slippery, two-faced clever scoundrel he'd turned out to be!—held every ace in the deck.

Very soon after his capture Don had been utterly dumbfounded to learn there was a definite tie-up between Sheppard, his three hired men, and Claude Ormond. Ormond being leader as a matter of course.

Sheppard had said to Ormond, "The boys catched this dark young feller spyin' on this place here. We don't know how much he's wise to, but it's a cinch we got to plant him as well as his dad."

And Claude Ormond had stared at Don as if he could not believe the cowboy was actually present in the flesh. Turning to the gangling peanut-headed Sheppard, he had rapped out savagely, "Didn't you set Slippery Jake on his trail as I ordered?"

"Sure I done that. . . . For once Jake must ha' lost the trail. Where is he?"

The smoothness and polish had dropped from Ormond as a man might shed his coat. "Yes, where?" he growled. "Perhaps Don Marr can answer that."

Don could, and he did so with brittle defiance. "If you mean that drygulcher who tried to shoot me on Pole Mountain, I dropped him and left him cold. . . . Why the devil did you put him on me, Ormond?"

"If you weren't such a dumb idiot you'd know why," Ormond almost snarled. "I'm smart, and I savvy women better than you do. Mull that over and get one reason why you were in my way."

Don had had little experience with scoundrels of Ormond's stamp. He had tangled with rustlers and horse thieves and had found them rather dull-witted fellows with one-track minds incapable of hatching far-reaching, cleverly devised, crooked plots. Clashing with a man of Claude Ormond's caliber was a new experience. Yet an experience in a clash of wits and skill he might have enjoyed if given an even break. Now, however, he was utterly helpless.

"SO I WAS stepping on your toes!" he replied. "Did you have another reason for wanting to have me killed?"

"Certainly. I play for high stakes, and I had planned to have both the owner of Cross M and his only heir liquidated. After this had been accomplished, I hoped to have enough pull in Elkmont to have myself appointed administrator of the Cross M estate. However, when John Marr said he'd sell out to Jim Foster for cash it was an unexpected break in my favor, of

which I took immediate advantage. On the whole our plans have worked out most satisfactorily. But I didn't count on your showing up, Don Marr."

At this point Sheppard had said, "Well, boss, we nabbed him afore he done no damage. Quicker we get him plumb outa sight for good, the better."

"I'm not so sure of that," Ormond replied somberly, thoughtful. "Frank, a clever man revises his plans as the scheme unfolds. He overlooks no least opportunity to turn a trick to his own advantage."

"Your talk's plumb over my head," muttered Sheppard. "But you're the smartest and sharpest old fox ever I worked for. So I'll sure string along with you. What you gettin' at?"

"You'll catch on presently, Frank," Ormond returned. Then abruptly, "Where's your horse now, Don Marr?"

Don was much too canny to tell the crooks where he had left his mount. If any honest man found the chestnut, it would immediately bring up the question of the whereabouts of its owner. That would start a search for the missing Don Marr!

He said flatly, "I'll tell you buzzards nothing."

But Sheppard immediately proved that looks, so far as the gangling fellow were concerned, were deceitful. Far from being either dull-witted or stupid, Sheppard showed he was both cunning and resourceful in his own right, a top-rank lieutenant for his superior officer, Ormond.

"I got 'er doped out," said Sheppard. "Marr don't need to tell us nothin'. He come here on his own hoofs. Why? 'Cause spite of all the pains we took, he run onto sign that led him here. . . . Chances is, Claude, that Don Marr seen Taggart's body, tied his hoss close by, and prowled on foot."

"Which means that unless it has been picked up before this, his horse is still tied along the main road," Ormond returned exultantly. "Sheppard, go get that horse yourself?"

"And cover the trail best I can?" Sheppard asked.

"No! The tracks of your horse and of Don's leading from the road to this ranch will affirm the lie we're going to tell Annette Foster."

SHEPPARD stared at the man. Don, gritting his teeth, also stared. Claude Ormond licked his lips as if enjoying a luscious bite of something that tasted good indeed. "Oddly enough," he went on, "the silly girl still believes Don Marr is just about right. She is going to hear from his own lips that Don murdered Sheriff Taggart in cold blood. That, Frank, is turning a trick to my advantage!"

The sizzling rage in Don exploded. "You can't put it over, Ormond. Hell, no! You can't make me say I did it."

"Can't I?" Ormond's smile was maddening. He opened the door to the second room of the cabin and permitted Don to see his father, John Marr, bound hand and foot, lying on a bunk in that adjoining room. "If you play ball, Don, the old man'll be freed," said Ormond. "If not—" he shrugged.

After this, Sheppard had ordered Desmond, the dishfaced runt who'd helped to capture Don, to station himself on high ground and keep a sharp lookout. Ormond had headed for the Slash F ranch, Sheppard himself had gone to bring in High Fence, and the other two men, Scar and Hubbend, had stayed in the cabin with Don.

Later, when Sheppard had returned leading the chestnut horse, he told Scar and Hubbend that since he had seen no man-hunters at all, he didn't think anybody had discovered either Taggart's body or High Fence. "Which means we

still got things our way, boys."

Still later, after Annette Foster, escorted by Ormond, had come and gone, after Don had told the lie he felt he must tell, and while horses were being led up in front of the cabin, ostensibly for the purpose of escorting Donald Marr to Elkmont, the young man glared at Sheppard and burst out:

"Now live up to your part of the bargain. Set my dad free."

Sheppard's lantern-jawed face broke in a sardonic smile. "D'you have any notion we would, cub?"

Don knew he was white-lipped. "To tell the truth, I didn't!" he gritted. His father was marked for certain death. As for Don himself—horse tracks would lead away from Nought 9 toward Elkmont for a short distance and then the prisoner would be summarily shot. The Ormond-Sheppard men, backed up by their boss, would tell the story, "Shot while trying to escape."

As if curious, Sheppard put a question. "Yet you come through for us and told the dame you kilt Taggart. Why?"

"There was another angle which I have no doubt this devilish Ormond figured on. . . . If I'd spit out the truth, Annette would have believed me. Then how long would Ormond have let her live? How long?" He strained at the cord on his wrists till the blood rushed to his face, turning it almost black.

HUBBEND, the nondescript gunhand who had brought up the horses, came in and said, "Scar, that chestnut hoss of this feller's is sure a humdinger. You like to ride 'im?"

"Sure 'nuff would," grunted Scar.

"Let my horse alone, you sidewinders!" growled Don.

Yet a tiny rift in the black clouds of despair lifted a faint hope. High Fence was a one man horse. No man except Don had ridden him, and he was the most skittish, spooky, high-strung animal Don had ever mastered.

Scar sneered, "You got nothin' to say about it."

"And bein' as how we have now framed Don Marr for back-shootin' Taggart, I reckon you can keep that hoss, Scar," Sheppard remarked, and grinned a mirthless grin. Though we still got to put a couple of others outa sight where they never will be found."

"He means father's and Taggart's horses," thought Don. "Their mounts are still around here somewhere! They're still alive! Not that knowing it is likely to do me any good at this time."

Soon thereafter the small party started out. Scar, mounted on High Fence, rode ahead. Behind him came Hubbend, with the mount they had provided for Don snubbed to his saddle horn by a lead rope running back to a hackamore. The man had no fear that Don might release himself. Sheppard had held a gun on the cowboy while Scar released the cord on his wrists, brought his arms around in front of his body and then lashed his wrists to the saddle horn. Don could, however, move his hands slightly, and his feet were free.

As the horses climbed out of the gulch, moving airline in the direction of Elkmont on this rain-misty night, Don explored with his right hand down the fork of his saddle. His fingertips contacted a rope strapped to the saddle, and straining against the cord on his wrists, he tried to unfasten the rope strap. If he could free the rope, and if— Too many ifs!

There was, however, one way by which he might free his hands. Hoisting his body in the saddle, Don slipped behind the cantle and then bent forward to work with his teeth on the knots in the cord tying his wrists to the saddle horn.

WHEN his stodgy mount offered no objection to this change of position, Don thought, "After all, Scar did me a favor by riding High Fence. That chestnut would have spooked and started pitching the second I slipped over the cantle!"

His exultancy was, however, short-lived, for he heard Scar complain to his partner, "This loco bronc is shyin' at every shadow! He's nigh jumped out from under me three times a'ready. Maybe if you go ahead—"

Scar had halted while Hubbend kept moving on. So before Don could get back in his saddle, Scar saw what he was trying to do and rumbled, "Foxy, ain't you? Get back in your saddle and set up straight or I'll break your neck."

There being no help for it, Don obeyed. Hubbend swivelled his head around. "Speakin' of breakin' his neck, I'll sure get a kick outa shootin' this walloper, 'count of what he done to Jake."

"Yeah, Jake was a pal of ours, Marr. . . . Keep goin' Hubbend. Better we ride a mite farther afore we make out like this prisoner was escapin'."

Thankful for this delay, brief though it was sure to be, Don racked his mind for some expedient, trick or ruse by which to save his life. It wasn't as if his life only was at stake. He had known before he left Nought 9 that the only reason Sheppard and his men had not murdered his father earlier was that they had wished to consult Claude Ormond.

Now, literally sweating blood, Don suddenly recalled stories told him by old Timberline Johnson. As a child he had swallowed those yarns, hook, line and sinker, and he was now remembering how Timberline in several of his hair-raising escapades had effected his escape when he was the captive of Indians or bandits or revolutionists.

Timberline had a natural gift for mimicry. He could imitate both birds and animals in a most realistic manner, and he had found in Don an eager pupil. Not that Don had practiced the art for some years, nor yet had he ever been able to equal the old master. But he was thinking now, "Timberline said he once spooked the Comanches by imitating a rattlesnake, spooked 'em so bad they stampeded and he made his getaway before they knew what was up.

"Another time, when four hard-bitten bandits were about to shoot him, the cry of a panther scared 'em stiff. They looked for the panther, and Timberline made himself scarce. . . . All hot air maybe. But—"

THE three horses were swinging through a glade with jackpines at the riders' left. The stars were cloud-blotted, misty rain was still falling, and here in the depths of the glade it was quite dark. Out of this darkness, close at hand, very close, there lifted abruptly the wild, eerie howl of a timber wolf. WhoooeeeooO! A blood-curdling sound to chill even the hardiest of range men. A sound to set range horses crazy, especially if it seemed that their dread enemy was actually upon them.

Donn Marr didn't try to repeat the cry, for at the first note the chestnut horse, High Fence, went crazy. Giving voice to a snort of fear like a blast from a trumpet, High Fence wheeled as if to dodge the wolf. His first leap carried him twenty feet. Then, probably because Spar's spurs involuntarily ripped him, the half-wild horse buried his head and began to pitch with the fury of its mustang ancestors.

Don could not watch the battle between man and horse, yet from the corner of his eye he saw Scar a moment later sail over High Fence's head and

hit the solid ground as if hurled against it by a machine. Scar would not be using his gun on Don for some little time!

Meanwhile other things had happened. Hubbend's mount leaped sideways and lashed out with both heels as if to protect itself from the wolf. Then it began running. Because Don's mount was snubbed to Hubbend's saddle horn, this animal was dragged along behind for a few yards, until the lead rope snapped. An oath from Hubbend streamed back as he vanished in the darkness, and Don reached out with his right foot and leg to kick his horse on the side of its head and turn it. In another moment it was stampeding, unguided, back toward Nought 9 ranch.

Utterly regardless of the wild pace at which he was hurtling along, Don again slipped behind the saddle, and with the saddle cantle pounding him in the stomach, he bent until he got his strong white teeth on the knot in the cord on his wrists. He must get himself free before he reached Nought 9!

SUCCEEDING at last, Don reached forward to catch the horse by its hackamore. Using this, he twisted its head around, brought it to a stop, slid from the saddle and tied the animal to a pine tree. On foot he then went on, swiftly yet stealthily, for the lookout, Dish-face Desmond, must not see him.

Reaching the cabin without any alarm having been sounded, he found the main room dark, the second one lighted, entered silently and stopped.

What he saw in that farther room—he shack's bunkroom—compelled his full attention. Near the east wall several floor boards had been pried up and moved aside; a tarpaulin had been spread near this opening, and dirt from a hole in the ground had been piled on the tarpaulin. Old John Marr, using a short-handled shovel, was digging that hole. Near the center of the room, watching Marr, stood Frank Sheppard, a Colt in his hand.

Don caught his lower lip between his teeth. In all the years he had known his father he'd never seen that doughty, stubborn old warrior to look so weary, disgusted and hopeless.

On silent feet, the younger man moved back, picked up the first weapon he could find—a stick of stove wood—and returned. Sheppard must have heard a slight sound, for he pivoted and his gun flamed in Don's face as Don swung his club.

Sheppard went down, the gun slid across the floor, while Don pounced on the man and stripped off his belt. Then, believing he had knocked Sheppard senseless, Don leaped to help his father out of the hole. Marr dropped the shovel and reached up his hands to his son. In his tired eyes was as much joy and gratitude as a man can possibly express in a look. He got his knees on the floor, clambered out of the pit and gave an abrupt shout:

"Sheppard's getting away! Stop him!"

Don whirled, too late. Sheppard was bolting through the farther door. He banged it behind him to ward off his pursuer. Don slammed up against the door, started to open it, but changed his mind, when from without came the crack of a rifle. The small window to the right of the door went out with tinkle of broken glass.

Sheppard's voice followed the rifle's report: "That's the stuff, Desmond. Keep 'em bottled up!"

Don turned. "Dad, is there an outside door to that far room?"

"No. And only two dinky windows, so small a man can't even crawl through."

"Then we're trapped!"

CHAPTER IX

In the Cabin

"TRAPPED!" agreed the older man. "But shove stuff against that door Don, to hold it shut. Sheppard blew in such a hurry he forgot to take his rifle along. It's on the south wall, son. Shells on table."

"And his Colt's somewhere on the floor, dad. Get it. At least we can hold 'em off. . . . Good thing whoever built this shack was stingy of windows!"

A half dozen bullets ripped through the front window, zinging harmlessly into the log partition. Don got the rifle, and ducking low under the window, thrust its barrel out, to fire three shots.

Immediately someone cursed, and then yelled, "They got guns. That makes it bad."

Don saw there was a heavy wooden bar for fastening the door on the inside. This he put in place. Then he shoved the kitchen table against the door. From the far room he heard a tinkle of glass as John Marr broke one of the small windows. After this the older man fired a couple of shots, one of which brought a howl of pain from Sheppard or Desmond, the dish-faced runt.

A furiously ridden horse thudded into the yard and was pulled to a skidding halt, whereupon Sheppard's voice demanded to know what in hell Scar and Hubbend meant by letting Don Marr give 'em the slip?

"Not our fault," panted Hubbend. "'D you hear that wolf howl? That wolf was right there among us and did he spook our hosses!"

"Wolf? Wolf?" Sheppard asked skeptically. Then, "I smell a rat, not a wolf."

"Me too. Now!" Scar's voice, filled with rage and disgust. "Now as I look back on it. . . . That hog-wild chestnut hoss sure punched a hole in the breeze, and I rid in here double with Hubbend."

The voices had located the speakers accurately, and Don decided it was high time to break up the argument, so, taking long changes of being hit, he sent two more shots through the wrecked window.

"Take to cover, boys!" Sheppard yelled. "We'll figure out what to do. Them Marrs ain't got a Chinaman's chance."

DON'S father growled, "Afraid the big ugly slob's right about that. But we'll give 'em a run for their money, eh, son?" He extinguished the lamp, plunging the cabin into complete darkness.

"Oh, we'll get out of it," said Don cheerfully. With things so much better than they had been, he could at last be cheerful. "We must win out, now we're together once again. I was wrong, Dad, and I want to apolo—"

"Let's forget all that, son. Forget we ever had a serious misunderstanding."

"Shake hands on it, Dad!" Don reached for his father's hand and pressed it hard. "I feel I'm to blame for this double-barrelled robbery plot, because if I hadn't pulled out in a huff you wouldn't have offered to sell Cross M."

"Partly right, Don. I'll admit I was down, all broken up, and I thought, 'What's the use of hanging onto Cross M when my kid's quit me?'

"But don't think you're to blame for any part of this hell-hatched plot. Since I've been Sheppard's guest, he's bragged a lot. If you can imagine it, Sheppard's actually proud to be allied

with a man as smart and tricky and two-faced as Claude Ormond.

"If you don't know it yet, son, Ormond planted Sheppard and his renegade gun-snakes here on Nought 9 to kick up plenty trouble between our outfit and Foster's. The raw gall of him, posing as Foster's friend, and shining up to Annette!"

Don expelled a deep breath, moved into the second room and made a cautious survey from each of the tiny windows; then he heard his father going on:

"Sheppard bragged how he and his men are wizards at hiding horse tracks and other sign. But if old Timberline gets on the job in time, maybe they'll change their tune! It was Sheppard and Hubbend who sneaked to our pasture in the night and drove those Angus bulls out on the range."

"I'd guessed as much," said Don. "Only I didn't know which ones of this gang actually did the dirty work. . . . Ormond hoped Foster'd get so unreasoning mad he'd kill you?"

"Uh-huh. Then Foster'd go to jail and Ormond's step in to protect Annette and by hook or crook to get control of both Cross M and Slash F. Which reminds me, you were to be drygulched, son. After the scurvy coyotes took me captive earlier today they told me you were dead.

"YOU can imagine how I felt, but, earlier this evening when I was tied here in this back room, they let me have one look at you. Then I knew you'd disappointed their bush-whacker, had gotten wind of the trouble and had pitched in on my side. Helpless though we both were, that made me feel mighty good!"

"Of course, quarrel or no quarrel, I'd pitch in on your side, Dad! . . . It was Annette who told me all hell had broken loose. She said I must get to the bottom of it."

"Annette?" the older man put in. "Do you mean you and the girl of Slash F talked things over?"

"What's so odd about that?" Don was not forgetting to listen attentively for sounds from without, nor yet to take an occasional quick look through the shattered window. Apparently the men who had the Marrs trapped had congregated in the pines across the yard where they commanded the only exit from the cabin, its door.

" 'Odd about it'?" said John Marr. "We-ell, I've been aware that you've seen a great deal of the girl in the past year, or more. But now she naturally believes I touched off this old feud once again. Nor can she help believing that I tricked her father, inducing him to raise a huge sum of money and then robbing him. So I'd think she'd not speak to my son."

Don smiled in the dark room, recalling that at the time when he had seen Annette on Slash F she had not lost faith in either of the Marrs. "Who did rob Foster?" he inquired. "Clever of Ormond to be with Jim at the time and to have the thieves tie him. That way no one would suspect he had any part in the scheme."

"Son, the man is damnably clever. My decision to sell to Foster caught him by surprise. But, fortunately for him, he heard of it in time to take immediate advantage of the opportunity afforded him. I have learned that Sheppard was in Elkmont that evening when Foster and Ormond rode in to raise the cash. Enough said on that point.

"Now this scurvy coyote, Sheppard, has demonstrated to me that he can imitate my voice fairly well. He and the repulsive old owl-hooter they call Scar pulled the original robbery. Today, this same pair—"

A BURST of six-shooter and rifle fire interrupted. John Marr plunged into the back room, while Don let three random shots go from the front window. As silence once again settled over the besieged cabin, Marr returned to his son and resumed:

"Today, this same pair, Sheppard and Scar, were lying in wait along the road to Elkmont. They had come on foot, and they had their boots so heavily wrapped in sacking they left no noticeable footmarks at all."

Don nodded. "I'm sure Timberline would have found some sign, but I could fine none, except the horse tracks of your mount and the sheriff's."

"Sheppard appeared about thirty to forty feet ahead of Taggart and me, while at the very same moment Scar rose up directly behind us to shoot Taggart without giving him a ghost of a chance. His horse sprang forward a few wild leaps, and the sheriff rolled from his saddle. Sheppard then caught his horse and mine. Scar picked the lawman's pockets, getting the Foster wallet, and then, using Taggart's gun, he put two more bullets into Taggart's back. I've seen revolting things in my time, but that sickened me.

"Afterwards, Scar swung up behind my saddle and Sheppard rode Taggart's horse. They left a snaky trail, one I doubt that even Timberline can either find or follow. But wait! You must have found that trail, Don. Otherwise you—"

"I wouldn't be in this trap now," Don finished bitterly. "If only I'd played my cards better. Dad, you ought to kick me—"

"Regrets are useless, son. . . . I've squabbled with Foster—and have enjoyed it—all these years. But now, oddly, we're on the same side for once, and I'll never forgive myself unless we recover his money for him and square ourselves with him and his bonny daughter. Yet unless help comes, we'll not—"

"Something's happening out yonder among the pines," interrupted Don. He had raised his head to the front window and was straining his eyes across the darkness. "It seems as if somebody else has arrived. Claude Ormond, I wonder?"

Sheppard's voice, raised high, whipped across the distance between pines and cabin. "Hi, you two Marrs! We've got a hostage here. Come out of that shack with your hands grabbin' sky or we'll shoot him!"

"The scummy renegades are bluffing," John Marr told his son, but his voice held no assurance that this was the case. "Don, have we the least hope of—?"

Don clicked, "You watch this front window and door and keep stalling 'em along, Dad. I've got a scheme!"

CHAPTER X

Feud's End

ANNETTE gripped the handle of her pistol to reassure herself that at least she was armed, and pushed on. Spasmodic shots continued to sound from the gulch in which lay the Sheppard cabin, and from the mere fact that this shooting did keep up she took heart. For this indicated that Ormond, Sheppard and his crew were not having everything their own way.

Of Ormond and Timberline she had seen nothing, heard nothing. She dropped down into a ravine, pulled her sweating, panting horse to a slower pace, and finally to a walk. She must move in on the fight silently, yet in the dark it was hard to tell exactly where she was until the firing accurately located the cabin. Dismounting, she took

precious seconds to tie her horse, more seconds to unbuckle her spurs. Then she stole into the main gulch.

All was dark here, no lights showing anywhere. Then the flash of a rifle revealed to her the broken window of the cabin and part of its wall. Paused, she heard noises in the pines across from the cabin, and turned that way. Perhaps Timberline, by some miracle, was holding Sheppard and his crew in the cabin. She bumped into two horses, but so intense was the darkness here in the depth of the gulch that she recognized neither. The rank smell of fresh sweat was on both animals. On she went, feeling her way among the trees, and suddenly she was almost among men bunched up here.

One stood head and shoulders taller than any of the others—Timberline. She almost called out to him. But the words died unuttered, for a voice she knew well, and now hated, said, "You holler to 'em, Frank. Tell 'em what they've got to do."

It was Claude Ormond who had spoken, and at once Sheppard lifted his voice, shouting toward the cabin, "Hey, you two Marrs! We've got a hostage here. Come outa that shack with your hands grabbin' sky or we'll shoot him."

NO REPLY came from the cabin. In the silence that followed Annette tried to tally the men present. Ormond, Sheppard and three others, besides the prisoner, Timberline. One fellow began to grumble about a bullet wound. Somebody ought to wrap it up for him. Ormond turned on him savagely. All that smooth veneer and polish with which Annette was familiar seemed to have slipped from him, leaving the man cold, brutal, vindictive. She heard him rasp, "Stop belly-aching, Hubbend. If you and Scar had been worth a damn you'd never have let Don Marr give you the slip."

She shivered, wondering how she had ever liked this clever scoundrel; realizing, too, that she had almost learned to like him much too well. But paradoxically, his brutal words also brought joy to her heart. For she knew Don had escaped from the men who had started to take him to Elkmont. She knew further that he was inside the cabin, for Sheppard had hollered, ". . . you two Marrs!"

"From what you jus' told me," Sheppard growled, "this Timberline come nearer to queerin' the deal 'n anybody else, Claude."

"Did he! I'd heard, naturally, that the man was an old Indian scout, a tracker. But I didn't suppose— Well, I underestimated him."

"Yah," spat Timberline. "You'll regret it yet, you two-faced reptile. B'gad, if I hadn't trusted you, you'd never have took me alive. Was I s'prised when you caught up with me back there little ways and stuck your gun in my face!"

"Snub him to a tree, men," said Ormond. "We'll let him live a few minutes longer. . . . Frank, tell old man Marr who we've got out here. That'll bring him to time."

Sheppard yelled, "You, inside there! We've got old Timberline. Now talk turkey. Fast!"

The reply was a rifle shot from the cabin window. The bullet, deflected by the pines, did no damage. But Scar and another man, who were close to the edge of the grove nearest the cabin, immediately poured a hail of lead through the window and into the door and front wall of the shack. Meanwhile, Sheppard, with the help of Hubbend, bound old Timberline to a fair-sized tree.

AS THE gun fire slacked off, Ormond said testily, "We've got to wind this

up quickly, for I must go to Slash F ranch."

"Yeah?" said Sheppard. "Wasn't you takin' a hell of a chance, lettin' that Foster gal go home? You mentioned as she heard what that danged Timberline had to say."

"Frank, I had some strong arguments in my favor. I convinced her his story was all cockeyed. You realize I couldn't permit her to come back here with me."

"Sure not. But after this fracas is settled, you still want it to appear like you're sidin' her and Jim Foster all the way. That you're their best friend. So what you goin' to tell her and Foster?"

"I'll stick to the original idea—that John Marr rode out with the cash; that Donald Marr was shot by your honest men while trying to escape as they were doing their duty by taking him to jail at Elkmont."

"Sure, sure! But Timberline's got to be beefed. How explain, that, huh?"

"Easier than you suppose possible," Ormond returned with smooth assurance. "I'll explain we discovered that Timerline had been taken into the full confidence of the Marrs and was in on the Foster robbery plot, and that, later, he tried to help Donald Marr, the man who murdered Sheriff Taggart, get away. Don't worry but what I'll make it stick."

"Maybe," muttered Sheppard dubiously. "I'm scairt the dame'll spill all she larnt t'night to Foster and that cowpuncher, Curly."

"A chance I was compelled to take," Ormond came back. "However, I'm a convincing talker, you know. It is, of course, all important that her faith in me remains unshaken."

Annette made a wry face at Ormond's back. How she wished the man and Sheppard would move farther away from Timberline. With them so very close she dared not free the old-timer yet. Her eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, and she could see much better.

Sheppard grunted, "Yah, you're plenty smart all right, Claude. But women is plumb unpredictable. . . . Hi, John Marr! I wasn't foolin' when I said we had Timberline."

John Marr's voice, unmistakable with its Scotch burr, answered, "Prove it, you—" The epithet was one of the range, profane and violent.

Ormond spun around on his heels. "Tell them you're here, Timberline. They'll recognize your voice."

"Me tell 'em?" ripped Timberline, without lifting his voice high enough to carry to the cabin. "B'gad, you must figure I'm a damned fool. Was ol' John and the kid to realize you got me they might bargain with you."

"And if they don't bargain, you'll kick the bucket," grated Ormond.

"I'll kick it plumb regardless anyhow. I wasn't bornt yesterday. You coyotes wouldn't live up to no bargain."

Ormond's gun flashed from its holster. "Yell to them, or I'll shoot you now."

Annette's hand was on her pistol. Never had she fired at a human target. But—

TIMBERLINE said steadily. "Cut loose, snake! If ol' John and Don knowed you had me for sure 'twould be like 'em — 'cause they're men —to do what they could to try to save my hide. Yeh, though knowin' plenty well that while you promised I'd go free when they gave 'emselves up, you'd doublecross 'em. I sure won't put 'em in no such tight spot. Cut loose!"

Annette had never admired a man's nerve more. Old Timberline was salt

of the earth; his nature pure grit. She saw Ormond's body twitch and then stiffen as fury moved him. But he holstered his gun, turned again to Sheppard, saying harshly, "We've got to figure out how to show the old devil to the Marrs while he's still alive. Let's talk it over."

Sheppard's men were at the edge of the pines, firing a random shot every now and then at the cabin, and now at last both Ormond and Sheppard walked a few yards away from old Timberline. Of this move Annette took immediate advantage, stealing up behind the tree to which he was tied.

She heard Sheppard saying, "They ain't got a show, Claude. Quick as they run outa cartridges, they're done. Then we'll smoke 'em out, or they'll make a break for it. Sure hope they try that, 'cause the only way they can bust outa that cabin is through the front door."

"But I've said I'm in a yank to get this business wound up," Ormond protested. "Couldn't we drag Timberline out to the edge of the grove and make a small fire that'd show him to them? . . . Here, gather some fuel, Frank. Put it at the left corner—"

"And how'll I light without gettin' a hunk of lead from the shanty?" Sheppard broke in.

"Damn it! I'll think of some way to light the fire," retorted Ormond. "But first—" His voice trailed off.

Annette did not hear him coming back. She had almost succeeded in freeing Timberline when a hand fell on her shoulder and clamped hard.

Ormond's voice clicked, "Who are you? Who are you?"

She flinched, tried to jump away. She reached for her pistol. Ormond's free hand caught her wrist and brought a sharp gasp of pain.

"You!" he ejaculated. "Annette! Trailed me, did you? Came sneaking in here!" His voice was now flat and cold and deadly.

Timberline gritted, "Let her 'lone." And though she did not actually see it, she knew he was straining with the fury of desperation against the rope which still held him captive. She had released his wrists first and had loosened the knots in the rope around his body, snubbing him to the pine tree. If only it would give way!

IGNORING Timberline, Ormond resumed, "Now that you know too much, Annette, I can make hot tracks and take you with me. . . . Of course, there is an alternative—to murder you, which will silence you forever. . . . Which'll it be, my dear?"

"Who you talkin' to?" came Sheppard's voice. The question was followed by a startled oath, and the oath by, "That gal! . . . An' she's wise to you! Wise to us! . . . Hey! Now we'll bring them Marrs outa the cabin, hands clawin' sky."

He turned and ran toward the edge of the pines. Annette heard him yell: "Listen, old man Marr and you, Don Marr! Now we've got you over a barrel. Annette Foster's here. Light the lamp so we can see you when you open the door. Then come out, hands empty, and we'll let her go."

Silence for a moment. Then John Marr shouted hoarsely, "Prove you ain't lyin', Sheppard."

Ormond bent his face toward the girl. "Tell them you are here! Call to them loudly."

Annette thought of Timberline's rare courage, a shining example for her to follow, and replied with a flat, defiant, "No!"

Fury rocketed through Ormond. Releasing his grip on her shoulder, he drew back his free hand as if to slap her.

"I'll jolt a wild scream out of you, woman! Take—"

A human figure rose from the dark earth almost under their feet. It was a tall, wide-shouldered figure Annette recognized even before she recognized the voice that clicked, "And you take this bunch of knuckles!"

Don Marr's fist met Ormond's chin, or some part of his face, with a definite smack. Ormond's left hand fell away from Annette's wrist. He reeled backwards, went down. Don Marr leaped on him, and when he rose it was with Ormond's gun in his hand.

"Duck low and run, Annette," he ordered tensely. But she didn't run. Already Sheppard and his men had realized something was going on. Two of them were moving in swiftly. Where the other two were, Annette didn't know. But now she heard a rending and snapping as Timberline finally broke loose.

"Let me at 'em, kid!" he yelled, and plunging forward he encountered the two Sheppard men. Flashes of brilliant gunfire, bullets whistling too close to Annette for comfort. Yet those same flashes showed her Timberline's towering figure as he clamped one arm around one gunhawk and one around the other, and brought their heads together with a resounding whack.

ANNETTE saw no more of this fight. Claude Ormond had risen as if shot upward by steel springs. Dropping the gun in his hand, Don leaped joyfully to meet him. Their fists striking flesh and bone made weird thumping sounds. They crashed up against trees, shaking down showers of pine needles, and broke apart and tangled again instantly, slugging toe to toe. Don uttered no word. Ormond made one wild cry:

"This way, men. Clean up on 'em!"

Knowing there were two more men unaccounted for, Annette ran toward the edge of the grove. She must—Timberline's unmistakable figure was there ahead of her. He had paused and was growling, "Where is them snakes?" Recognizing her, he added, "Two of 'em won't fight for quite a spell. But where—?"

Across the open area light sprang up inside the cabin. In the bright yellow beam which poured from its broken window Annette caught a glimpse of two men crouched close against the outside wall. Suddenly the door snapped open, and for a fleeting moment John Marr was visible inside the front room, retreating across it.

One man by the wall raised an arm and fired through the window; the other—it was Sheppard—threw his Colt around the door jamb and emptied it, raking the room. Then around the one corner of the cabin came old John Marr, swinging a rifle in both hands. It crashed down on Sheppard's skull. Sheppard collapsed.

Annette had scarcely been aware that Timberline was no longer beside her. Now by the light from the cabin she saw him reach the second man and pick him up and slam him against the wall. He boomed, "Cleanin' house like old times, John!"

SOMETHING welled up in Annette's throat. If she lived to be a great-great-grandmother she'd never forget this wild fight, the Marrs and Timberline. She wheeled, sped back through the trees with the panicked thought that she should not have left Don alone fighting Ormond. What if Ormond had—?

"That you, Annette?" Don's voice. "Yes, Don! You're all—"

"Feel as if I'd tangled with a mountain lion on the prod. But I licked him and tied him up. Where're the rest?"

"The fight's over, Don. Over, and we won. . . . How'd you get out of the cabin? Your dad got out of it too, not using the door.

"Hum? Made use of the grave Sheppard intended for Dad, and burrowed under the wall on the back side."

Annette didn't understand what he meant just then, but it didn't seem to matter. What mattered most was that Don, panting, his clothing ripped to shreds and smelling strongly of masculine sweat, caught her in his arms and pressed her closely, yet tenderly, to him.

"Sweetheart, I'm not going to wait. I'm telling you now how I love you, every little bit of you and all of you."

"Oh, Don, I love you, too. If anything had happened to you I'd have—

His lips silenced her with a kiss, and it seemed a long while later before he said practically, "One of the first things I must do is round up High Fence all over again. . . . The money will be returned to Jim Foster. But he won't buy Cross M, for this silly old feud is ended. Dad will use those black bulls for the purpose he had in mind when he bought them, to start an Angus herd on his own land, under fence, not on the open range. And this bunch of range pirates we rounded up tonight will go to—"

"Let's not talk about them, Don lover," Annette interrupted. "Let's talk about us." She lifted her glowing, happy eyes and her radiant face to his once again.

Ten feet away, unseen and unnoticed by the lovers, Timberline and old John Marr stopped. The tall old-timer nudged his companion. "That's what I always has hoped would come about, John."

"Uh-uh?" said the doughty old ranchman. "Me too. Only I was too darned stubborn even to admit it. Till now!"

THE END

CHECK YOUR SHOOTIN' IRONS

By GALE STEVENS

IT WAS not so long ago that Texas was a hell-fire state. Within the memories of our grandfathers are pictures of railroads pushing across the Great American Desert. They witnessed the final destruction of the great herds. The great Indian tribes, admitting defeat in the face of tremendous odds, retired to the reservations which the benevolent victors provided.

They remembered too, the pictures of the growing western states. Across the windswept prairies, through blizzards and droughts, the lanky cowpunchers herded the longhorns. Their destination was a new market town that Joseph G. McCoy, a trader in stock from Springfield, Illinois, had built practically alone. Toward that town streamed the herds—and the men to make and lose their money. That town was Abilene, Texas.

From a few shacks and shanties the town practically roared out of the ground to become a flashing metropolis. With its traders and commission men ready to do cash business, and the waiting Kansas Pacific Railroad to carry the stock East, it was a natural boom town. And it boomed lustily!

As the town grew, and more and more thirsty, hell-bent for pleasure cowpunchers found their pockets filled, things began to roar. Saloons and gambling halls mushroomed on every street. Gamblers, cheats, and fakes brought their parasitic activities to keep the money in circulation. With the cowpunchers trying to let off the steam stored up on the grinding, grueling trek across western trails, and the "sweet young things" from Kansas City, New Orleans, and St. Louis there to help them along, the town was wide open. Lawlessness ran rampant. Brawling and fighting were mere sidelights. Every dispute was settled with the point of a gun, and the man who could draw

fastest won all the arguments.

Into this scene stepped Thomas J. Smith. He was, as his name implied, a quiet-looking man. Slightly under six feet in height with a thick, black, handle-bar mustache, he was not impressive at first glance. But close inspection would show broad shoulders, a lean and wiry body that seemed to be ever tense like a tight spring, and blue grey eyes that were quick and alert.

He had made application for the job of marshal, but Mayor T. C. Henry, the town's executive officer, seemed wary at appointing such a peaceful-looking fellow to the position. The custom had been to appoint the toughest, quickest man-killers to the position so that his reputation would command obedience. He only would last, of course, until a faster gunman took him on, and then the cycle would begin again. This method, rather than preventing violence, promoted even more vicious duels in the game of "who's going to get the marshal."

"How do you propose to clean up the situation?" asked the Mayor of the prospective marshal.

"Well, Mr. Mayor," replied the soft-spoken gentleman, "it seems to me that anyone can bring in a dead man, but a good officer brings them in alive. You have an ordinance prohibiting the wearing of pistols in town. If that could be enforced, I think your problem would be solved."

The Mayor grimaced and queried, "How in the world do you propose to enforce such an ordinance among a thousand, fighting, brawling cow-punchers?"

"I'll take their guns away from them one by one."

The Mayor gaped. He swore in Thomas J. Smith as town marshal.

The news of the new appointee preceded Smith through the town. As he walked through the streets examining his new home, the old timers silently checked off another customer for a grave on Boot Hill. A dozen tough-looking hombres vied with each other for the privilege of trying him out. Big Hank, a rough trail-rider, took it upon himself to challenge the new marshal.

"Are you bossin' this town now?" he demanded.

Smith showed him his badge and explained slowly and quietly that he was the new marshal.

"There's an ordinance against carrying pistols," he added. "I'll have to ask you for yours, sir."

Big Hank was flabbergasted. He let loose with a series of foul oaths and invectives rarely to be heard, even in Abilene. The substance of his remarks was that he refused. Moreover, he backed away to get room to draw, for his hand was close to his holster.

Smith's fist shot out to the ruffian's chin. He toppled over like dead weight. The marshal stooped over, took Hank's pistol, and walked on.

Now the town was suddenly awakened. An unarmed, pint-sized stranger taking the gun away from a drunken, murderous cowhand must have been beginner's luck, they said. The next man, ready for the marshal's order, would put him away for good.

Wyoming Frank heard the story and roared with laughter. He thought himself an expert gunman, and no pint-sized marshal was going to take his pistol. He strode out of the saloon and down the middle of the street looking for his foe.

He didn't walk long before Smith came along. With his hand on his holster he called out, "I hear

"Yes, sir, if you please," Smith replied and extended his hand to receive it.

"Well, I'll pour lead into any man who takes it."

"That would be foolish," replied the marshal crowding in close to the killer. "It's the law and we all have to abide by it."

Wyoming Frank, put off his balance by the marshal's crowding tactics, shuffled backwards trying to get room to draw. Smith followed him like a cat. Toe to toe the pair backed through the street. Finally Wyoming Frank shot his hand toward his holster. Smith's right fist lashed out against his chin. A left and another right followed hard and the gunman was sprawled on the ground, unconscious.

Well, the rest of the self-styled bad men had seen enough. Meekly, they filed up to the marshal and relinquished their weapons. Smith, through the business people in town, arranged to have the guns checked while the men were in town. Each business place had a rack where the men would leave their weapons until they were ready to set out for home. It was a simple solution.

Tom Smith was marshal of Abilene for only six months. During that time he commanded the respect of every man. He was kindly and honest, fair and firm. When he finally was murdered by two cowardly gunmen, the people of Abilene mourned sincerely for the honest man who had given his life in their service.

In the town of Abilene there is today a slab of granite with a bronze plate upon which is inscribed the appreciation of the town.

Thomas J. Smith
Marshal of Abilene, 1810
Died a Martyr to Duty, November, 1870
A Fearless Hero of Frontier Days, Who In Combatting Chaos, Established the Supremacy of Law

AMAZING STORIES
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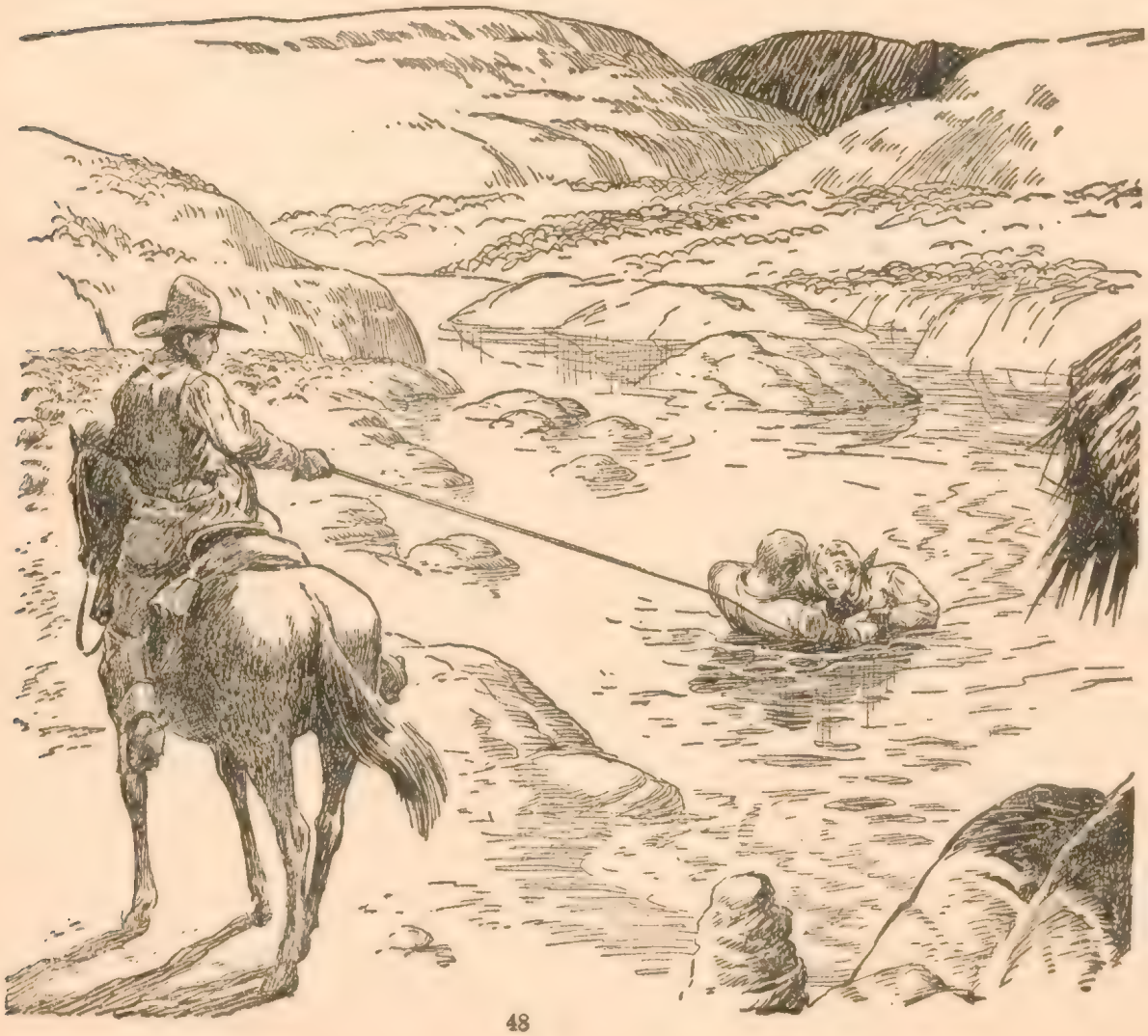
ANGEL IN THE RIVER

By Ennen Reaves Hall

Acting as the opposition to border liquor runners is not what you'd expect a woman to be—but there she was . . . and she wound up in the river



The man on the bank ignored the menace of the rifle—went right on with his rescue work

IT WAS said in the Twin Territories that Big Sam Elledge was one U.S. deputy marshal who always got his man. That is, he had until he ran up against the border liquor runners, Poe Coster and Bat Wynan. He hadn't got them, or even gotten close enough to them to see the noses they were openly thumbing at him and the law he represented. Sam had heard that betting men among the white settlers were giving odds that he wouldn't catch the slick whiskey peddlers and Sam didn't like talk like that.

Still more than he disliked the ribbing though, Sam was worried about the way the firewater the Indians were getting were turning them back into hostile, dangerous savages. It had to stop and it was up to him to stop it. That was why he now stood in the door of the Sand Bar Saloon, worst hell-hole in all the frontier territory between Kansas and Texas, pretending a drunkenness he was far from feeling and arguing with the owner, Sloppy Joe Amber.

"Can't shee why my money ain't any good here. I got plenty, shee? Jush sold a car load of gov'ment beef."

Sloppy' Joe's eyes burned avidly at sight of the well filled wallet Big Sam had half pulled from his pocket but there was still suspicion in his face and the deputy knew it was a toss up as to whether or not he got in. He'd heard that Sloppy Joe hand picked his customers carefully and but few strangers got further than the door. That was why the Sand Bar was a popular rendevous for outlaws and men on the dodge—it was one place where law men didn't go. Joe Amber saw to that and the location of the place simplified his job.

The border line of the two territories —Oklahoma and Indian Territories—

ran along the middle of the wide, sand clogged Canadian River and also right through the middle of the Sand Bar Saloon. For the place stood on high stilts, to be above flood danger, like a long legged crane on the sand bar that split the strange river in two.

Sam knew, too, that the bar of the saloon was actually on the Oklahoma side, where the law permitted the sale of liquor, but half of the big room was across the Indian Territory side which made it accessible to the Indians who were forbidden by law to buy intoxicants. And handy for men dodging the law. If a lawman armed himself with papers and went in openly he would be sure to find his man on the wrong side of the room if he found him at all. Only a few rash lawmen had ever attempted getting inside the Sand Bar and some of them hadn't gotten out.

All of which was only a part of Sam's reasons for trying it this way. If he could get in without attracting suspicion he could follow up his hunch and watch for the leak that was letting whiskey through to the Commanches. That leak, he had decided, had to be here. But so far his act didn't seem to be going so well.

"We're full up," Sloppy Joe said. "I can't let only so many in at once on account of the sands."

That, Sam knew, was his stock excuse when he thought it wise to turn any one away. The river was dreaded and feared by whites and Indians alike because of the quick sands that made it dangerous and unpredictable and it was said that these treacherous sands lay close to the surface all along the bar. No one but Joe Amber knew how deep he had had to drive the pilings that supported the saloon and the talk was that the building did list badly when the water was high or it was over-crowded. So it was Amber's prerogative to limit the number of customers allowed in at once and he used it to suit himself. However, he seemed reluctant to lose sight of Sam and the money he'd glimpsed.

"Tell you what, stranger," he said, affably, "suppose you wait on the bank at the foot of the ramp and when somebody leaves we'll call you."

Big Sam almost laughed at that suggestion. Sloppy Joe must think he was very drunk to be willing to wait at the foot of the long ramp that led from the river bank to the saloon, with money in his pocket. The wooden foot bridge was only dimly lit by an oil lantern and the few houses in the river settlement was nearly a mile away. A man could be robbed there easier than in the saloon. Besides, Poe Coster or Bat Wynan could come and go while he was waiting his turn there.

He shook his head reproachfully at the saloon man. "You think I'm too drunk to come in, don't you, Joe? Well, I'm not, shee? But if you don't like my comp'ny why'n hell don't you jush shay sho."

WHILE they were talking several men had come up the ramp and now waited behind them. They started pushing past and one of them, a young fellow with weak lines in his once handsome face, stopped to look Big Sam over sharply.

With a gesture toward Amber the newcomer said, "Why not let the coot in, Joe? He can always leave sudden like if we don't like him or he don't like your rotgut."

Sloppy Joe reversed his decision quickly. "Sure thing, Bat, if you say so. Reckon we got room for one more."

Bat! A tingle played along Sam's spine at sound of that name. Here was the man he wanted, all right, but the outlaw's show of friendliness made

him suspicious. Could Bat Wynan have known him, or recognized him from descriptions he'd had? Six feet four blond giants weren't too common and Sam feared the unkempt appearance he affected was a thin disguise at best.

There was nothing to do but play out his hand so Sam lurched on into the room. Sloppy Joe's hand on his arm stopped him. "I'll have to take your gun, stranger. No side arms allowed inside."

A quick glance around showed Sam that he was lying and for the fraction of a second he hesitated. Then saw both Coster and Wynan watching him and knew that refusal would be fatal. No use starting trouble, though he had a hunch it would come anyway soon enough. With no more than a shrug he fumbled with the buckle of his holster, then dropped it into Amber's outstretched hand.

The Sand Bar was something different in frontier saloons. It boasted girl entertainers and Sam's first glance around showed him a half dozen hard-faced dance hall characters of varying ages mingling with the motley crowd of men. One of these came at once to attach herself to Sam and he felt certain that either Wynan or Amber had sent her.

"I'm Ruby," she announced. "You look lonesome, Big Boy. Wanna buy me a drink?"

"Shure, shure," Sam mumbled and watched her signal the bar man. Joe Amber used damn good looking girls for sucker bait, he was thinking. This one had bright black eyes, as hard looking as chips of anthracite, and a smooth, olive skin. And the one dancing over there with a man looked like an angel, with a heavy braid of red gold hair wound around her head like a halo and oval cheeks as softly pink as a baby's. He laughed to himself at the comparison. An angel in a hell hole like the Sand Bar would surely be out of place. Probably the girl was the worst of the lot.

JUST then the couple passed close to the table where Sam and his uninvited companion sat and Sam saw the girl was in difficulties. In a low voice she was remonstrating with the man, who insisted on holding her too close, and Sam saw the pink in her cheeks was the flush of anger.

She turned her eyes briefly toward Sam and they were of such a deep violet blue as to be almost startling. As their eyes met for a brief second Sam felt an odd surge of excitement and a tingling ran through his veins as though he'd had an electric shock.

There was so much of helpless appeal in the violet eyes that Sam had to fight an instinctive urge to jump up and knock down the man whose arm was tightening visibly about the distressed girl. Instead he did something else calculated to free the girl from her embarrassing position. He thrust out his foot in a careless manner and tripped the man neatly.

The bar man had just set a bottle and glasses on the table. As Sam's outthrust boot tripped the man he lunged forward to sprawl squarely across the table, carrying it and the startled Ruby to the floor. But he had involuntarily released the violet-eyed girl as they fell and Sam was able to catch her and swing her quickly aside. By the time the cursing man and girl had extricated themselves from the wreckage of the table the angel-faced girl was across the room and Sam was on the floor, trying with maudlin inefficiency to salvage the spilled liquor. But he was still feeling the lift he'd felt at hearing the girl's low "Thank you" as he pulled her aside. She had a voice to match her face, he

was thinking, and she was smart. Smart enough to know he had put on an act. But what in all creation was she doing in a hell hole like this?

A bar swamp came to clean up the mess and Ruby flounced back into a chair and ordered more whiskey. "Damned cattle," she stormed. "What they need is a whole barn to themselves."

Sam agreed and made a good pretense of drinking that part of his whiskey that he couldn't spill. It was hard to keep his eyes from following the other girl for she interested him, which was something few women had ever done. A few moments later he was calling himself a fool and reminding himself that he knew less than nothing about women for the girl and Bat Wynan sat at a table with their heads intimately close together. He could see the violet-eyes and they were soft and tender and she laid a white hand lovingly over Bat's brown one. The sight angered Sam queerly.

He managed to put a bored indifference into his voice as he asked Ruby: "That Bat's gal? The one who turned us over."

Ruby followed his glance and answered shortly. "Yes. She's been hanging around here for a couple of weeks, pretending to work. But everybody knows that she's just after Bat, trying to get him loose from Poe so he'll leave with her."

Sam said carefully, scorning himself for the surge of disappointment that jarred him, "Ol' Bat's too smart for that. Him and Poe's doing all right trading with the Injuns.

RUBY merely shrugged as she poured him another drink and Sam knew better than to try to pump her. But he made the mistake of letting his gaze shift again toward Wynan and the girl and when he looked back he found Ruby watching him suspiciously and was caught off guard.

"Kind of funny about that accident a while ago, wasn't it?" She said, softly. "I don't hardly see how that club footed guy managed to stumble like that, or why Molly Shannon didn't fall, too."

Big Sam hardly heard her. He was thinking the name fitted the girl somehow. Molly Shannon had a clean, wholesome sound . . . And then he looked again and started calling himself names for Molly Shannon had moved closer to Bat and the outlaw's arm was about her. No girl who had anything to do with Bat Wynan could be wholesome and clean, no matter what she called herself.

Absorbed in watching the couple across the room Sam hardly noticed when Ruby left their table or when she came back. But directly Poe Coster came and took a chair beside them. He was an older man than Bat, with a viciously mean face, and Sam knew he was a ruthless and dangerous character. For many years his lawlessness had terrorized the frontier country and Sam had heard that Bat's older brothers, both now serving time in a federal pen, had started their infamous career as members of Coster's outlaw gang. Yet Poe Coster had managed to keep out of the foils of the law and Sam had long burned with the desire to take him to Ft. Smith on a charge that would stick.

Coster helped himself coolly to a drink and said, blandly: "How's things over in the Commanche country, Big Sam?"

To hide his surprise Sam took a long one, letting his shaking hands spill a good portion of it. By then he managed to laugh drunkenly. "You got me wrong, my frensh. I'm big all right but

I ain't Sam. Namsh John Dawson and I ranch on Anadarko land."

"Yeah?" Poe Coster's voice didn't change but Sam didn't like the agate look in his eyes. "My mistake then. Thought you resembled a damn law man in the Commanche Nation—Big Sam Elledge. I don't suppose you know him then."

"You spose right," Sam mumbled. "Don't know no damn law men and don't want to."

"Law men are all right," Coster said, "in their place." He got up suddenly and his voice sharpened to saw edge quality. "But their place don't happen to be in the Sand Bar. Better be glad you ain't him, feller."

HE WALKED away and mice played up and down Sam's spine. He was too wise to underrate the menace in the outlaw's voice and knew that he had walked into a trap that wouldn't be easy to get out of. It wasn't any time to be remembering all the tales he'd heard of men disappearing after visiting the Sand Bar but Sam couldn't help thinking of them as he sat there watching Poe Coster walk away and feeling the coal black eyes of Ruby boring at him. He could feel cold sweat beading his face as he tried figuring his chances of getting out and down that ramp without being hit over the head and dumped into the river.

Coster went straight to the table where Bat and Molly Shannon sat. He started talking to the girl and Sam kept watching them, even though he knew it wasn't smart to show his interest.

Coster said something to the girl that made her look at Sam. Again their eyes met and the look of terror in the violet ones almost brought Sam out of his chair. Just in time he restrained himself but a whole of insects seemed fluttering around inside his stomach, trying to get out. Something, he knew, was due to happen quick.

His mind had hardly accepted the warning before Coster acted. He jerked the girl to her feet, brutally, and slapped her viciously across her face! Her scream was only a thin sound and quickly choked off but Sam was half across the room before it ended.

A warning voice inside Sam told him to stay clear but just then Coster slapped the cringing girl again and Sam threw all caution to the wind. Nobody slapped women around Big Sam Elledge and got away with it. When he reached Poe Coster he had dropped all pretense of being a drunken rancher on a spree. He was again fighting Sam Elledge and he let the outlaw feel his hard hitting fists where they would do the most good.

Bat Wynan had made no move until Sam knocked Coster across the table. He jumped up then and Sam caught the gleam of a bottle in his hand. Men started crowding around as Coster got up, fighting. He rushed Sam, feinting wildly, and Sam buried a fist in his soft midriff. Coster folded up with a 'whoof' just as something crashed against the back of Sam's head and the room blacked out.

When Sam struggled back to consciousness he immediately became aware of a wild confusion all around him. The fight must have started a free-for-all, for men were stomping around, fighting and cursing. He lay against a wall, out of the way of trampling feet and there was a soft tugging at his clothes. It took him a few seconds to realize that the tugging was made by hands going through his pockets.

His eyes seemed glued shut but he forced them open just in time to see Molly Shannon slip his wallet into the front of her dress. That was gratitude

for you, he thought painfully. But just what he might have expected from Bat Wynan's girl. The whole scene with Coster might even have been staged to get him to do just what he did do and give her this chance to roll him.

He tried to move but his head still throbbed, the room was whirling in slow circles about him and his arms felt like leaden weights. The girl moved away and booted feet loomed over Sam. "Damned spying law man!" Poe Coster's heavy voice said and the booted foot crashed against Sam's ribs making him feel like an explosion had taken place inside him. Again the boot lifted and this time it came down against Sam's head and Big Sam Elledge went back to sleep.

THE next time he knew anything he felt clean, cool air in his face and knew that he was outside. His head still hurt and added to this was a new pain from stopped circulation in his arms. He tried moving them and found they were bound tightly behind his back, wriggled his feet and knew they were tied together, also. Experimentally he moved cramped fingers and felt rough sand under them. Then why couldn't he see stars overhead? It was stygian blackness all about and he wondered dully if he had been blinded by those blows.

Then he became aware of small sounds and concentrated on identifying them. Men were moving about, talking in low voices, and busy about something. From above him came the sound of feet and as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness he made out the dim shapes of upright timbers. Then he knew where he was. He lay directly under the Sand Bar, among the pilings that supported the building. A small square of light appeared overhead and a packing case was lowered on the end of a rope. The arms of two men were lifted to receive it, then the light blinked out. After that there was only sounds again.

A horse stomped, and there were the sounds of ropes being tautened about a pack and Sam knew a horse was being loaded with the liquor lowered from above. As his head cleared voices emerged from the blurred sounds.

"Better be sure he's dropped into a sand trap." Sam knew the voice to be that of Poe Coster. "We can't take any chances on even his body being found."

"Ugh," a guttural voice answered, "Him not found when river devils get him."

Sam felt hackles rising on his neck. He knew that second speaker was a Commanche, which meant that Poe Coster was using greedy young bucks to do the delivering of the firewater to the Indians. The Commanches were river wise and knew where it was safe to ford the stream that made a virtual island of the sand strip.

"River Devils" was the name given the quick sands by the Indians. Because these sands shifted with changes in the current the river had no such thing as regular crossings, the river wise following signs that indicated safety. Sometimes it required more than a mile of travel to cross the half mile wide stream because of the necessary detouring to avoid places where muddied roiling indicated the presence of the dreaded sands. Only men versed in river lore ever attempted even daylight fording so these Commanches must know of a hard bottom place not generally known about.

Doubtless they also knew of places where a man could be dropped and never seen again. Sam knew the river could yield up the bones of many a

man who had mysteriously disappeared if it wasn't for the fact that the sand traps were practically bottomless. He had even heard of small herds disappearing in the days before the white settlers came to share the Indians' fearsome respect of the river. Now it looked like a rash deputy marshal would be joining the horde of uncounted victims. Sam strained cautiously at his bonds, knowing he had only seconds to escape. They were strong and unyielding.

Just then a hand brushed lightly over his body and a woman's voice whispered in his ears.

"I'm cutting you free and then you must get away. But hurry!"

HOPE surged up in Sam as he felt the ropes ease under the knife. He flexed his arms as his rescuer worked over his tied feet and as soon as he was free he got silently on his feet. He staggered and would have fallen if the girl hadn't caught him in strong arms.

"Hurry!" she urged again. "Hide somewhere until daylight."

Before Sam dared trust himself to move two men loomed up close. One knelt down and felt around, then started cursing. "The damn coot's gone! Bat, you sure you tied him good?"

"Damn sure," the voice of Wynan answered. "Take a chance and strike a match, Poe."

A light flared and Sam just had time to flatten himself against a piling and freeze there. But the frightened girl moved a little and the faint swish of her skirt betrayed her. Another match flared and swung about to search her out. Poe Coster swore again as the light found her face.

"So it's your sniveling friend, Molly Shannon! Bat, I told you to get rid of that damn girl, that she couldn't be trusted. Now it's her or us so it's got to be the river for her!"

He made a lunge for her but Sam, still unseen by him, moved quickly. His arms were still numb so he bent double to make a battering ram of his head and charged straight at the sound of Coster's big body. His head struck the other's soft belly and both of them went to the ground. But Sam was up before the other got his breath back, had snatched the girl's hand and pulled her out of the blackness of the pilings toward the lighter area outside. Behind them men cursed and bumped into each other and matches flared cautiously.

It was lighter along the open sand bar and directly they had to pass through the area lighted from the saloon windows. Sam put on a new burst of speed but behind them somebody yelled and a bullet whistled past their heads, dangerously close. Another sprayed sand over their feet but by then they were back in sheltering darkness and zig-zagging to keep out of the line of fire.

The saloon door opened, letting new light flood their path and they had to dodge to the very edge of the dark water to avoid it. From the number of new guns barking at them Sam guessed that several men had joined in the pursuit but the most of the Sand Bar's customers, he knew, would soon turn back to their own pursuits, indifferent as to what happened to a lawman and a girl in trouble. To expect help was foolish.

The girl, hampered by long skirts, couldn't run as fast as the men behind them and their pursuers were gaining on them. Molly tried to free her hand from his, gasping: "Let me go and save yourself!"

SAM'S answer was to tighten his hold on her hand. He should let her go, he reasoned with himself. She was Bat

Wynan's girl, her trickery had probably got him that first clout on the head and she had robbed him when he was helpless. But she was also a damn pretty girl with the deepest violet eyes he had ever seen—eyes that stirred a man up until he felt like a spinning top. Sam grinned wryly and admitted to himself that, thief or no thief, he was taking chances on this Molly Shannon. Big Sam Elledge didn't ask for a sure thing before betting and once he'd laid his money on a card he backed his play to the limit.

Another geyser of sand spurted dust in their faces and Sam knew this was one play he was going to lose unless he turned up an ace quickly. He made a quick decision.

"We'll take to the water," he told the gasping girl. "It's our only chance."

"But the quick sands?" Her voice was filled with terror. "We don't know where to cross."

"That's right," Sam admitted. "But it's the river for us if Coster gets us. Which way do you want it, Molly—with or without Coster?"

Her answer was to plunge into the knee deep water, floundering awkwardly in her long skirts. Sam went ahead, leading and guiding her. When men started racing opposite them they squatted low in the water until they had passed, then got up and struggled on.

The river bottom was soft and oozy and with each step they seemed to sink deeper. Sam's feet felt like leaden weights as he pulled them out of the sucking mud and his face was wet with a cold sweat as he tugged at the girl behind him.

"Faster!" he urged. "They say the faster the better in the sands such as these."

A glance over his shoulder told him a new menace threatened them—the menace of moonrise. The glow was getting stronger behind the trees along the eastern bank. Once that three quarter moon got above the tree tops they would be plain targets for anybody on the sand strip. And Oklahoma moons rose swiftly.

Voices warned them Coster and the others were returning and they squatted in water up to their necks and waited while they passed. Poe Coster's voice reached them plainly.

"They must have took to the water and if they did they're goners. Hell, Bat, I'm going back for a drink and let the river have 'em."

Sam drew a deep breath of relief and rose to go on. But the girl floundered and almost fell. "Sam!" Her voice was terror stricken. "I—I can't move. The sands have me!"

SAM'S heart lurched sickeningly but he tried to keep his voice free of panic. "Don't struggle," he warned her. "Keep still and I'll pull you out." But he knew how empty such words were for the moment he stepped close enough to help her he would be in the trap himself. Molly knew it, too, and offered quick protest.

"No, no, Sam! Don't come close or you'll be in. Go on without me—and—and bring back help."

Sam knew she knew better than that. If he went back to the Sand Bar Coster and Wynan would stop him with a bullet. The girl would be sucked under long before he could bring help from the town, even presuming he could get safely to the bank. "Steady," he told her, and stepped back cautiously.

Her hand against his chest tried to stop him. It held some object. "No, Sam," her urgent whisper came. "Take this and go on. It's your wallet, I took it to keep for you when they first knocked you out. I thought Joe would have you taken down the ramp and left

on the bank like he always does to troublesome drunks and I knew the swampers would roll you. They always do."

Sam suddenly felt good, in spite of their terrible danger. He wasn't even very much afraid any more as he stepped closer to the girl and told her confidently, "Put your arms about my neck, Molly, and hang on. I'll have you out of here in a jiffy."

Before long he knew better, and so did Molly. Though he tugged and pulled with all his might, until he felt like the muscles in his shoulders would snap, he couldn't budge her. And then he found his own feet wouldn't move and he wasn't surprised.

"I'm in, too," he told the girl quietly, "and struggling is making us sink faster. Molly—don't be afraid."

He still had his arm about her and felt the shudder that went through her body. He was sick with horror himself at thought of their being buried alive in smothering mud but Big Sam had faced death before and fear wasn't in his make-up. He tried to think of a comforting thought to offer the girl.

"It won't be so bad," he told her. "They say drowning is the easiest form of death and the water's deep enough to —to get us first."

She knew what he meant and again a shudder shook her. But plainly she wasn't the hysterical kind, Sam noted with relief. She wasn't going to scream or cry. This Molly Shannon was a woman in a million.

She spoke suddenly, low voiced. "I—I don't mind so much for myself but if only Mary knew . . ."

"Mary?" he questioned, just to keep her talking. It was better to talk.

"My sister, and Bat's wife. The doctors say she can't live long and I promised her I'd find Bat and bring him back to her. That's why I had to stay in that terrible place, Sam. I kept trying to get Bat to go home with me. Now Mary will never see him again."

So she wasn't Bat Wynan's girl after all! Sam felt better and tried to think of somethink comforting to say to her. "I wouldn't feel bad about that," he blundered. "Your sister's better off never to see Bat Wynan again. He's bad clear through."

SHE turned her face up towards his and the faint light the rising moon was sending ahead rested on her hair and again Sam saw the illusion of a halo around her head. This time he didn't find the thought at all funny.

"I think you're wrong, Sam," Molly said, earnestly. "Not many men are bad clear through. Bat isn't, I know. He had a job and he and Mary were happy until his brothers and Coster robbed the Wells Fargo office one night and shot the agent. He recognized the Wynans so the law grabbed Bat, too, even though Mary swore he was home with her. He knew he hadn't a chance because he was a Wynan so he broke jail and ran away."

"And turned outlaw," Sam said, harshly. "And tonight he set there and let Poe Coster slap you and a few minutes ago he was trying to shoot you. And still you can talk about good in him! Molly, you women beat me. Don't you ever listen to cold reason?"

In spite of their serious predicament Molly's Irish wit cropped up. "We reason with our hearts, which is a mighty good thing for all you men. It was man's cold reasoning that put Bat dodging the law, Sam. They reasoned a boy growing up in a family of outlaws had to be one himself. But Bat didn't choose that kind of life. And tonight he set there and let Coster slap me to draw you into a fight because Bat's afraid of Coster. Sometimes fear makes

cowards of men, Sam, just like it sometimes makes them brave."

Sam was silent, tremendously moved by her gentle logic. They were in the very grip of death, its pressure tightening about their bodies with each passing second, and she calmly alibied for the man who had helped put them there. Was she crazy—or just the angel he had thought she looked when he first saw her?

With a startling suddenness the moon cleared the tree tops and flooded the river with light. It seemed to strike fire from Molly's bright hair and it brought into sharp relief the man on the horse that rode slowly along the sand bar. He saw them at once and called out: "Molly! That you out there?"

Before Sam could stop her Molly answered. "Yes! We're caught in the sands, Bat!"

A rope flashed silver in the moonlight. "Catch, Molly!" Bat called, "and slip the noose under your arm pits."

Sam caught the lariat deftly and slipped the loop over both their shoulders. By spreading his arms about Molly he could take the worst of the strain and rope burning. When he had a firm grip on the rope he called, "Ready!" and it tightened instantly.

Sam thought his ribs must cave in under that fearful pressure as the rope grew tighter and tighter. He had the sensation of coming apart in the middle for the downward pull on their legs was just as terrific. There were long, dreadful seconds when it seemed that part of their bodies must surely be left in the gripping sands of the river bed.

A shout came from towards the saloon and Sam knew the rescue act had been discovered. He writhed inwardly as Poe Coster's voice reached them. "Let 'em alone, Bat! Let the sands have the damn fools!"

Sam held his breath, waiting to slide back into the bog from which they were so slowly emerging. But the pull on the rope stayed steady.

Coster yelled again, angrily, and Sam guessed he stood on the saloon ramp, watching them. "Let 'em alone, you damn fool! If you don't I'll stop you with a bullet!"

Now, Sam thought despairingly. But the pull went right on. Bat Wynan wasn't stopping.

Then the crack of a rifle split the night and Sam saw Bat lurch in the saddle. But the trained cow pony went on with the snaking and directly Bat straightened up.

WITH a final tug that seemed tearing them limb from limb they came free of the sands' clutches and then they were strangling in muddy water as the pony dragged them like dead logs to the dry strip.

Bat whirled the horse and came back to where Sam was freeing himself and Molly from the rope. He rolled off and fell beside them and Sam knew the boy was badly hit.

"Take the horse," Bat gasped out. "Mile down stream a big elm hangs over west bank. Hard bottom there, you can cross."

Molly knelt beside the wounded outlaw, trying to staunch the flow of blood from his side. A rifle ball sang past Sam's head and he saw figures running from the direction of the saloon. They were trapped again on the sand bar!

Bat groped feebly for his gun but Sam beat him to it, then darted toward the middle of the strip to draw fire away from the girl and Bat. He knew he was a plain target in the moonlight but he vowed grimly to down as many as he could before they got him. The feel of a gun in his hands again was good.

His first shot stopped a big figure in the lead and he thought the next two

paid off, too. Then the hammer clicked on an empty shell and Sam knew he was through. The men were close by then and anything could happen while he went back to get Bat's belt and reloaded. He had to think fast, and act faster. Yelling the fearful war cry of the Commanches Sam ran straight towards his attackers, swinging the useless six shooter about his head like a war club. The running men stopped in confusion at sound of that blood curdling yelling and Sam let fly with the pistol. It struck a man and downed him and the rest broke and ran back toward the saloon as though pursued by demons. Sam ran on until he stood over the first man he had shot. It was Poe Coster, all right, and Sam was fiercely glad that the outlaw was alive, though unconscious. He'd learn yet to respect the law he had scorned, but from behind bars. Once Sam caught those whiskey peddling Commanches, as he knew he could, they would provide plenty of evidence against Coster to save themselves.

Molly came up leading the horse. "Bat's dead," she said calmly, but her tired voice freighted with grief.

Sam said, truthfully, something he couldn't have said an hour earlier. "I'm sorry, Molly. But tell Mary she can be proud of him for he died every inch a man."

She helped him load the unconscious Coster on the horse, then got up behind the wounded man. Sam walked beside them as they started off slowly to find the crossing Bat had told them of. But there was something he had to say to Molly and it wouldn't keep.

"Molly, I'll be slow to judge a man after this. And I'm hoping you'll be kind in your thinking about me, like you were Bat. There might be more good in me than I know about." Big Sam Elledge was feeling very humble in the presence of this angel he had found in a river hell hole.

Molly's hand reached down to press his shoulder gently. "I've found a lot of good already, Sam. And I expect to be finding more all the rest of my life."

All the rest of her life . . . Big Sam liked that. It had the sound of wedding vows and it satisfied him as nothing he had ever heard before.

★ JAILED BY REQUEST ★

By R. CLAYTON

IT HAPPENED in the 1880's in Arizona—the most ridiculous miscarriage of justice that our American West can boast of.

A cattle rancher was facing trial on a felony charge. He was sure that the case was lost, for the judge was his enemy. Thinking that it would be best to work the thing out in his favor in whatever way possible, he went to the judge and asked that his sentence be invoked immediately—even though the trial date was still four months away.

Then during the following week he traveled the two hundred miles on horseback to the Territorial Prison and approached the warden with his fantastic request.

"Hmmm!" the warden grunted, reading. "You say you are the prisoner yourself? No officer with you?—and no conviction?"

"I bring my own commitment papers," the rancher asserted. "Special favor of the judge. The least sentence I can hope for is twelve months. This is the slack season on the ranch now but I expect to be exceedingly busy next year, so I asked the judge to let me start serving my sentence in advance."

The warden was impressed by the peculiarities of the case, but the paper was legal and he had to let the man in. Before an hour had passed, the rancher was wearing stripes.

For nearly four months he lived with the most notorious criminals the West had coughed up. The days passed very slowly for him. But when his trial was held back home with the defendent "in absentia"—a strange thing occurred. The jury found him "Not Guilty!"

When he received this news, the prisoner calmly turned in his striped suit, donned his own clothes, shook hands with the perplexed warden, and galloped back over the two hundred mile journey to his ranch.

A dark figure, carrying something heavy . . . a sodden splash in the river

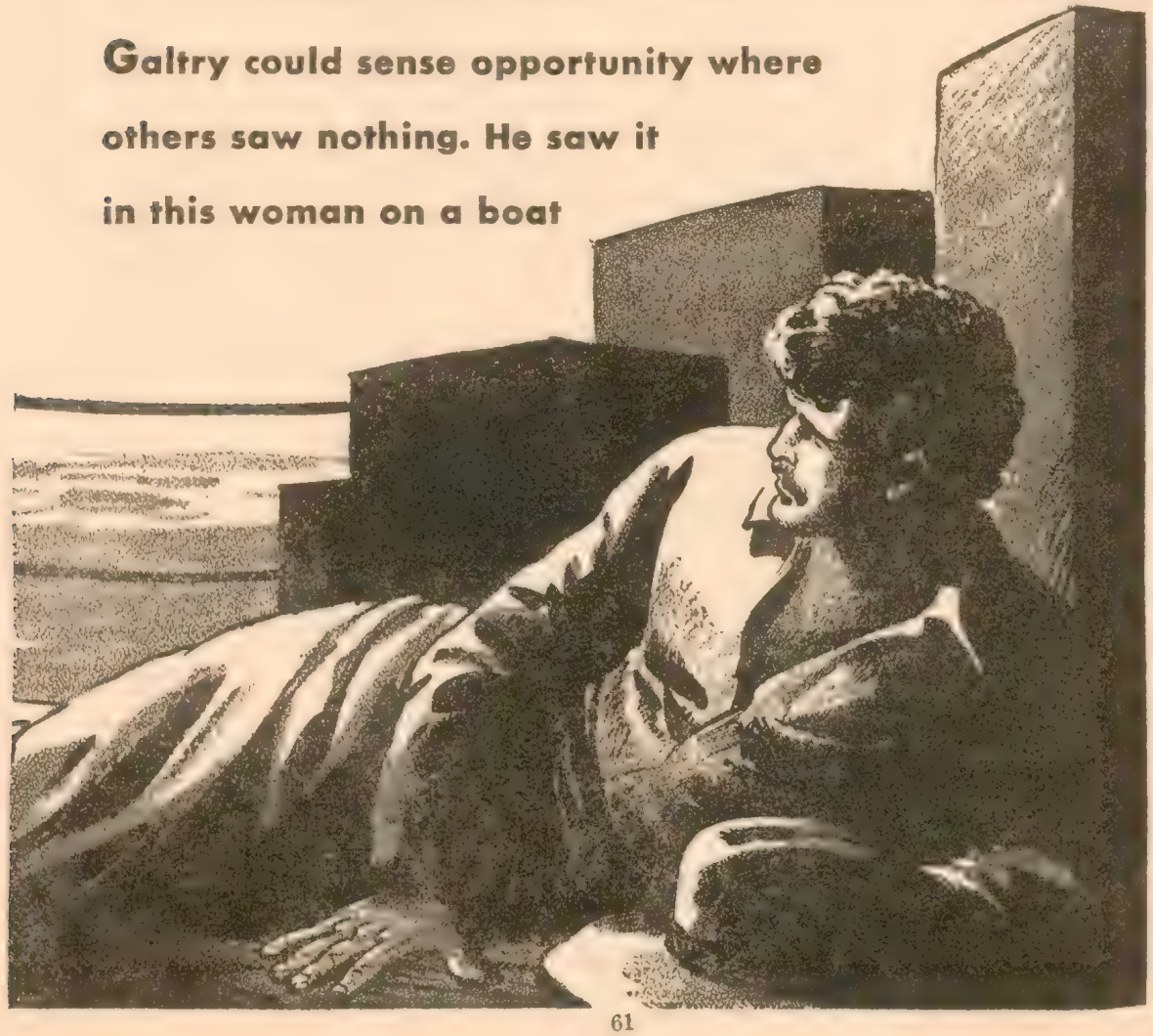
By Giff Cheshire

THERE was nothing in the bearing of the young man rising from a table in a saloon deep in the wintry waterfront of Portland to indicate that his last dollar had just slid across the plush. There was nothing to indicate that hunger gnawed at his insides with rodent teeth or that thirst worked its promptings along his nerves.

Tall, broad and whip-limber, Lex Galtry was a man who forged ease into a solid weapon. Now he grinned away objections, drawling, "Later, maybe, gentlemen. Right now I have a thing or so to do," and sidled through the river crowd stuffing the smelly, gas-lit room. Long fingers studiously touched the single half dollar in his pocket, and he paused briefly at a narrow vacancy at the bar.

Food or drink? Galtry lifted his shoulders, slacked them and grinned again. Food sustained, yet drink elevated, and now he required uplift. There was always the free lunch, if he could bring himself to it. There were innumerable niches where a man might sleep. There had to be, else from where had all these people crawled? A bar tender brought interrogation into otherwise blank eyes, and Galtry said, "Whiskey. Double." That would make

Galtry could sense opportunity where others saw nothing. He saw it in this woman on a boat



an impressive prelude to the free lunch, should he choose, and would exhaust the four bits. Picking himself out in the crowded line in the back bar mirror, he was astonished at how well fed and carefree he still looked.

The man closely crowding at his left was white haired and floppy of hat. Draining a nickel beer. A man whose acquaintanceship would prove profitless. The man on his right seemed more likely. Galtry lifted his drink, felt its hot path down his throat.

Weaving drunk, of florid face and dandyish dress, this second man was solemnly muttering to himself. "Gotta lay off. Gotta sober up. Gotta make the *Sellado* when she sails, or Purdy Miller'll skin me sure!" To further this aim, he immediately tilted a whiskey glass and sloshed the contents down his throat. Very shortly he wove on a still broader loom.

Lex Galtry's ears had pricked up at mention of the *Sellado*. So this purposeful man had to be aboard when she sailed. All day Galtry had pondered means of securing passage on that river boat, which plied up the Columbia on the first lap to the fabulous gold streams of the interior. The venture of his last ten dollars had been intended to raise money for a ticket to Lewiston, jump-off to riches and high adventure, solid food and potent drink.

Galtry set his glass back on the bar, his big, alert eyes suddenly hooding. "Work on the *Sellado,* friend?"

"And how I work. And the name's Comstock. Chauncey Comstock—!"

"Master?" Flattery was the key to many doors, Galtry had long since discovered.

"Hell no," said Comstock. "Bar tender. Purdy Miller's got the concession on all the Arrow Line tubs. Son of a gun won't let a man drink on duty. Us jigger's got to come into these rat holes and guzzle rot-gut. 'S'a crime."

Galtry nodded that it was indeed, thoughts stirring. It was then around seven, and he knew the *Sellado* sailed at eight. The Arrow Line ran luxury packets sporting swanky salons and dance music and elegant food. A trip on one, he found, was now more appealing than ever. In such an atmosphere a man might make connections that would solve many problems. Down the line somewhere a man said, "In Grant and Colfax I claim we elected us a team. Old Ulysses S. . !" Galtry said, "Will this Purdy be aboard?"

"Hell no. Not Purdy. He ain't got sea legs, Purdy ain't. That jigger makes the money, while us poor cusses polish his mahogany. Sometimes I don't feel it's right."

Galtry was experiencing a lift that stemmed from something more than the double slug of forty-rod. The Chauncey chap was almost out on his feet. And Lex Galtry could smell beef steak somewhere in the offing. He laid his palm under the man's elbow.

"I'm going aboard the *Sellado.* Shall we stroll along together?"

COMSTOCK turned and looked at him unsteadily. He saw, so far as he was able, a sizeable man, impeccably dressed in the Eastern manner, raven of hair, rugged of jowl. Yet, as did most, he seemed attracted by the genial brown eyes and generous mouth and disarming friendliness. He tottered forward in sudden affection.

Galtry pointed him in the other direction and out toward the street, following. He paused at the door long enough to snug his neck scarf and turn up the collar of his great coat. They stepped into the darkened splatter of rain. Galtry turned his new charge left and strode beside him for several blocks. Then he paused where an alley-

way opened.

"Let's have another little jolt before we go aboard, eh, Chauncey?"

Comstock followed him without question, perhaps without awareness. Galtry stepped carefully around some empty barrels, piled behind what appeared to be a warehouse. There he delivered the brand of jolt he had in mind. There was much power beneath that tailored exterior and it came into heavy function in the operation. The bar tender straightened without much sound, then he folded over and slid to the cobbles. Contentedly, as if he had really wanted to rest.

Galtry dragged him into a shelter, found some burlap to cover him. He looked down a moment in genuine regret. "You'll be snug and undisturbed until morning, friend. Happy dreams."

He came out onto the sidewalk again and went briskly but with waning confidence toward the dark hulk of the *Sellado,* rearing in the distance. Beyond it, on the far bank, stretched a long string of ghostly waterfront structures and above them the dim, thinly scattered lights of East Portland.

A purser yawned at the foot of the gangplank, collecting tickets from passengers already boarding. Here Galtry experienced more dubiety.

"Purdy Miller sent me," Galtry told him. "I'm sliding the schooners, this trip."

"What happened to Comstock?" the officer asked, with bored interest. "Get his snoot full again?"

"I understand," said Galtry, breathing easier, "that something of the sort happened." He passed on up the gangplank, meeting no objection.

"You ought to clean up on tips, this trip," the purser called. "Lot of big wigs going up." He let out a long breath. "They're the only ones that have anything left, on the up trip."

PUNCTUALLY at eight o'clock the *Sellado* cast off her lines, rolled her big paddles and stood out into the benighted channel of the Willamette. Silently and elegantly she crept downstream, a luminous jewel upon the current, coming quickly to the confluence of the Columbia where she turned a graceful stem upward toward the deep mysteries beyond the Cascade Range.

Lex Galtry had sidled his way aboard to be met by an irate master trying to calm divers thirsty passengers already gathering at the bar. He experienced little difficulty in getting that institution opened for business. The bar proper stood along the inner bulkhead of the gay salon, separating it from the man's cabin, where gambling and other pursuits unsuited to feminine eyes went on. The boat officers were preoccupied with their duties, while the waiting passengers were happy enough in the fact they needed to wait no longer, so Galtry proceeded without interference.

The white jacket he found in the storage compartment off the bar became Galtry and set him up. And there was nothing awkward in his bar tending, for he had absorbed well in his years on the other side of the long polished top. Had he been less diverted by increasing hunger, he would have felt quite cheered as, with a striking of music, the packet got under way.

Then, as he bent at prosaic labors, a husky yet very feminine voice said, "Well, Lex Galtry! How you've come down in the world. Or is it up?"

With nerve writhing according to its own inclination, Lex Galtry lifted eyes from the tiny under-bar sink where he had been rinsing glassware. Two locks of waving black hair inclosed his startled face in parentheses.

She was a slight thing, this girl, with a head of honey colored hair now elaborately arranged for evening. She wore

another of those sweep-skirted gowns with which she had decorated many an evening on the steamer coming up the coast from California. Yet he had placed her even before he looked, from the subtle and exotic scent she used.

He had expected almost anything but this. He had not seen Shelby Luce since debarking from the ocean steamer, at Portland, a week before. As far as he knew he had not thought about her, except as a man remembers pleasanter, better hours. Galtry reached for the fruit tray.

"Lemonade without much sugar," he remembered. "Or have your tastes come down? Or is it up?"

"Lemonade without much sugar," the girl said. "And it's still up." She slid onto a stool, curiosity crowding into her eyes but a polite tongue restraining it. She took materials from her bag and rolled herself a sliver-thin cigarette, which she lighted.

GALTRY softened a pair of lemons, remembering the ten days on the *Oregon Beacon,* coming up the coast. He had been flush then, though somewhat overbent on bankrupting himself, he now admitted. Spencer Luce had relieved him of a good share of that money in the ten days, nearly the last of it. Spence Luce lived by gambling, supporting an expensive daughter, and admitted to it cheerfully. It would be embarrassing for Shelby to connect that point with the present Galtry industry, which she likely had already done.

Galtry cut the lemon in two and squeezed it, not caring to look at her too closely, though aware that her hazel eyes were on him. He had told her a bit too much that starlit night on the Pacific. Of a family with treasure and name but no humor. Of a son with humor, scorn of name and meager sense when it came to treasure. Of a quarrel and a guarantee of absence purchased for a thousand dollars. . .

Maybe Shelby Luce was thinking of that and the vanished thousand as he handed her the lemonade. Her face was studiously serious, though he could not be certain just when the change had occurred. Then thought was fractured by another man who came up beside her; in fact the atmosphere seemed to part to let him through. He stopped close to Shelby Luce, smiling a little as if less aware of her than the fact that she would be aware of him.

Galtry's eyes widened. This was an immense individual, a prime animal of some sort, sleekly tailored. Though eyes and skin placed him short of forty, his face was covered with a luxurious growth of copper colored beard, carefully parted and brushed to silkiness. A magnetism flowed from him that fairly prickled Galtry's skin. The man realized this galvanic quality, seemed to preen himself in it.

Shelby Luce appeared to recoil from him, something in her eyes going cold and brittle and dangerous. If it had been in the man's mind to share his presence with her, he changed it, at that, and passed through the little archway toward the games.

Galtry had a strange feeling. That had been hate he saw in her eyes for an instant, hate cold and calculated and consuming. And in the same instant he had seen something in the man's expression, as if a flinching.

"Did the whiskers do that?" Galtry asked. "Or was it the close, hot breath?"

"In case you don't know," the girl said, "That was Chellis Damrock. He owns the fabulous Star Dust mine, beyond Lewiston. A brilliant mind, a man of magic. He gives me the feeling of a live coal in evening dress."

"You've met him before?"

"Not directly. But I will again." She crushed the cigarette stub in a pewter receptacle on the bar. Her voice lowered to a cold, deadly monotone. "I will again."

BEYOND the dropped overhead vaguely separating the bar from the main salon, steamboat society was progressing in all its elegance. The male sex was in heavy preponderance, mining men, merchants and professionals, whose business took them back and forth between Portland and the lucrative goldstreams of the interior. The first violent, disorganized rush of discovery and claim was past, and these were staider folk, many grown astonishingly rich in the previous decade of exploitation.

Now they strove for the niceties of dignified affluence. And the steamer line had done everything to provide the atmosphere in which such an ambition might flourish, at a handsome fee. The deck was covered in gorgeous scarlet carpetry, windows were draped with lavish chintz, the bulkheads glittered with gilt and plate glass, and the furniture was impressively ornate and useless. The scanter sex lent final effect by blending a wide assortment of colors, perfumes, scented powders, and alluring figures.

Shelby Luce finished her lemonade and another thin, rice-paper cigarette, while Lex Galtry tended patrons, who visited less frequently now, their thirsts somewhat assuaged, their spirits at the top level permitted by the new decorum. Yet Galtry felt he was getting someplace. Already his pocket hung heavily from small silver accrued to him from customers pleased by his services and pleasantries. He pondered the advisability of deserting the bar long enough to visit the dining salon for a long overdue dinner. The gauntness of his middle was fast growing unbearable. He had not eaten in nearly twelve hours.

Then Spencer Luce put in an abrupt appearance and took the stool next to Shelby. Tall and thin and loose moving, he was a man who took the casual and the astonishing with equal placidity. So now he took Galtry. With no flicker of expression on his thin, grey face, he accepted the rye and tap water Galtry fixed for him promptly.

"Getting some place, Galtry?" Luce asked, presently. "Or do you stay with the boat, just going back and forth like a bobbin?"

Galtry took the cloth from his arm and briefly polished the bar. "I weave as the spider weaves, making his web. Into which a fly might blunder."

"Poor eating," said Shelby. "Though nice poetry."

"Poets don't eat," said Galtry.

Spence Luce ran a palm across his sharp chin. "Thick, aren't they?"

"Flies? You doing any business?" Galtry asked.

"A gambler never stops doing business, my boy. Particularly when business looks so good. When the flies are so thick." He ruminated. "Gamblers are not poets."

Lex Galtry went abruptly woolgathering. A concerted stir in the salon caught his attention, an alerting and orienting of passengers like filings in a magnetic field.

THERE came into view a superbly striking woman. She was alone, moving languidly, unconcerned by the interest she created. Contrasting the flouncy fussiness of the other women, she wore a simple and sleek black gown that showed many lines, long and sculptured and breathless. Her arms and shoulders were bare, her black hair unadorned. Stark simplicity. It was her face that riveted Galtry's attention. It

was not pretty. Yet her glance touched him, and he felt some subtle fire leap the gap and run through him.

"Give up the web idea?" Shelby Luce asked, unconsciously touching her own upswept hair. "Catching flies with your mouth, now, Galtry?"

"Who is she?"

"Muriel Damrock."

Galtry looked again. This woman was at least ten years younger than Chellis Damrock. "His sister?"

A smile played on Shelby's lips. "Sorry, friend. But our prime brute likes them young and fresh. That is Mrs. Chellis Damrock." She slid off the stool and disappeared around a corner.

Muriel Damrock's eyes swept the girl briefly, then she made her unconcerned way toward the gambling tables, beyond sight. With a sigh, Galtry fixed Spencer Luce another rye and tap water. The salon resumed its customary hum. After a moment Galtry could remember that he was probably the hungriest bar tender on the river, that night.

Spencer Luce must have observed the gauntness. "I doubt, my friend, that you have been engaged in the fly trapping business very long. There's a code among us clip men. For one thing, we don't design on one another. I'm afraid I embarrassed you, recently, without realizing it. I'd like to give it back."

Galtry scowled. "You'd ought to know better than that!"

"I do." Luce sighed. "But I reserve the right to be a fool, now and then. Let's put it another way. Let me stake you until you empty your fly traps."

Galtry's reply was cut off by the abrupt appearance of Chellis Damrock. If the galvanic brunette had been seeking him, she had not found him, or if she had found him, she had changed her mind about wanting him. He was alone, but every inch as majectic as he had been on his last visit to the bar. He took a stool beside Spencer Luce, though the bar was otherwise vacant. With a wave of the hand he ordered straight Scotch, unconsciously studying his reflection in the mirror.

GALTRY had a creepy sensation. Highly charged people, the Damrocks. He served the drink and immediately received another shock.

Into Spencer Luce's narrowed eyes had come that same swift-gathered hatred Galtry had seen in Shelby's. A harsh and horrible light that flamed violently for a brief instant before it was masked out by the gambler's blue-steel coldness of scrutiny.

Chellis Damrock felt it. He picked up his glass, making a show of geniality. Yet his fingers trembled. "Nice evening," he said to Spencer Luce.

Galtry was aware that it was a studied action. As Chellis Damrock had flinched under Shelby Luce's cold gaze, so now was he deeply afraid. Deep water ran here, an involvement of circumstances widely beyond ken, Galtry thought, and emotions raw and fundamental.

"You're a stranger, I believe," Damrock said. "I don't remember seeing you before. Going up on business?" He took a cigar from a gold case, then on second thought offered one to Luce, who seemed not to see.

For an instant Luce's gaze remained icy cold. Then he smiled, relaxing. "Of a sort. I'm hunting a long lost brother." He carefully set down his glass.

"So? Maybe I know the man. I'm pretty well acquainted."

"Maybe so. His name is—or was—Waldo Luce."

"A mining man?"

Luce shook his head. "A gambler, like myself. But I understand he took

a flyer into mining. That is what is strange. There is where I lost track of him."

"Well. Tell me about it." Damrock was straight on his stool now, his huge body alert and intense, his eyes raking Luce.

Galtry had a strange feeling that critical information was being evoked and given here, information that Damrock desperately needed and that Luce gave in deadly calm. And both in studied purpose.

SPENCER LUCE rolled a cigarette and lighted it thoughtfully. "I heard from him last about six years ago, when my daughter and I were in New Orleans. We wrote to each other only at intervals, once or twice a year. In the last letter Waldo told me his luck had been running sour and that he had taken a fling at prospecting. It was an excited letter, the kind a man writes when he thinks he's on the verge of something big."

"Oh. So?"

"He had been in Idaho, and he had located something, he said, but he didn't know just what. He had little knowledge of mining, and this stuff was away from the main gold fields. But it looked good to him, and he had filed a claim. He wrote from Portland. He was going back, taking some mining engineer whose judgment he trusted in with him. Strange to say, that is the last I ever heard from Waldo Luce. Letters I sent to all his old haunts came back unclaimed. I was down on my own luck for a long time. Once I had the money, I headed this way to see what I could learn. So—do you know anything about him?"

Chellis Damrock's eyes had registered many emotions, and there was no telling what was taking place behind the flowing beard.

"The mining fellow ought to be able to tell you something," he commented presently. "Did your brother give you his name?"

After a long moment Luce answered. "He may have. I just don't seem to recall."

"You probably could remember it, if you tried?"

"Probably. Yes, quite likely."

Damrock shrugged. "How fortunate your brother wrote you about it. I don't want to seem macabre, Luce, but supposing this mining man killed Waldo Luce for his claim. Thinking him all alone in the world, a wanderer without family or friends." He laughed harshly. "I tell you, that would be poetic justice."

"Wouldn't it, though?" asked Luce.

"Anyway, it's fortunate he wrote you."

"Only natural. A gambling man hedges whenever he can."

Chellis Damrock stood up. He lifted immense fingers to his red beard and combed them through thoughtfully. He smiled and bowed.

"Sorry I can't help you. I'd say, find that mining man. Will I be seeing you again?"

"I rather think so," said Spencer Luce . . .

THE *Sellado* wended its slow but steady way through the immense and darkened gorges of the Columbia, and in the dead of night put in at The Cascades. There she tied up to await daylight for the portage of passengers and cargo around the rapids to the middle flight of the three level river. Once she lost her gently pulsing motion, the passengers seemed to feel that the gala evening was done and retired to their cabins to sleep until morning.

Shortly after midnight Lex Galtry found the salon had emptied, and he

closed the bar. His hunger gnawed at him now, and he made his way down the long interior passage only to find the galley long since locked for the night. Emerging onto the passenger deck, he noticed light up in the pilot house. Someone was on watch up there, but the likelihood of him having food in his possession or a key to the galley was remote. With a sigh Galtry made his way down toward the stern.

His prowling eyes located a pile of canvas sheeting. He regarded it speculatively for a moment, then crawled between the great folds and pulled them over him. He was not without comfort. He knew he had stumbled into a galvanic complex of emotion. Involving a millionaire, a gambler and a honey-haired girl. And a witch dark woman, slender, sultry, mysterious . . . Much might be accomplished here by a needful and enterprising young man . . .

Galtry awakened long later in instant alarm. Sound drifted to him, and it dawned in his drowsy senses that someone was coming along the outer runway. Embarrassment as to his quarters blended with the fear of abruptly losing them and caused him to burrow deeper.

The steps beat past, and Galtry decided there were two men. They treaded on, and Galtry made a peephole to venture a look.

He saw two figures straightening from exertion. There came a sound of a splash, the two impressions so close together that Galtry could not help picturing whatever had arced out over the river. But he could picture no detail, and enormous curiosity filled him. He squirmed to get a better look at the two night toilers.

Additional sound materialized, a clattering on the deck, and after the elapse of a frozen moment Galtry realized he had sent something that had been resting on the pile of canvas tumbling on a brazen course toward the men on whom he had been spying.

They had energized into fast motion, plunging toward and beyond him. He retained the impression of two silhouettes, one tall and slim and fast moving, the other moving even faster, blurring beyond hope of recognition.

Galtry pondered for a long while. Men had various reasons for consigning things to the tight-lipped confidence of a river or a sea. Weariness pressed heavily upon him, and then, in the middle of a thought, he fell asleep again.

IN A cold and fog-damp dawn, Galtry heaved himself stiffly from his resting place. His fellow travelers were not yet astir, and Galtry had good reason for wanting to be up and away before they became so. He made his way to the gang plank and down it and across the landing.

The town of Cascades scattered itself thinly at the base of ruggedly lifting, conifered mountains. Here the Columbia pinched its broad waist about a pair of islands, creating a channel of devil's brew too turgid for navigation. Here the thick stream of river commerce to the fast developing inland territory made the first of two portages.

Lex Galtry flicked his gaze over the settlement behind the landing at Lower Cascades, a palm stroking his unshaven chin, his thoughts dwelling upon his empty stomach. Yet more immediately in mind was the fact that he was deserting ship, so to speak, and a desire to make himself inconspicuous during the portage operations to come. He passed up a trail, alert for opportunity to accomplish any of his purposes. At the end of fifteen minutes he halted, discouraged. There was nothing here save a scattering of cabins. He found a vantage point and stood there, looking down at the landing.

They were stirring aboard the *Sellado* by now. As Galtry watched, the little mule drawn portage train rolled down the narrow gage track and stopped on the landing. Deckhands began clearing the freight deck, transferring inert cargo to the train. From what he had heard the previous evening, Galtry understood this train would have to make more than one trip to the other end of the five mile railway, to where the steamboat *Bellflower* was waiting at Upper Cascades. Meanwhile, passengers would rise and breakfast and make themselves ready to resume the journey. They would be the last to make the portage. The *Bellflower* was due to sail up the middle stretch to the next portage at Dalles City at eleven o'clock. And, though tips had mounted the previous evening, Galtry still lacked the money for a ticket.

After long rumination, Galtry turned again and started along the trail toward the upper landing, optimism returning, again whiffing for opportunity with a necessity whetted nose. He passed along green, forest-scented aisles, hearing the great roar of the river and the morning racketing of divers forest denizons, and he cautiously skirted an occasional settler's cabin.

In a couple of hours he reached Upper Cascades, where happily there was a store, and presently, propped against the scaley bole of a towering pine, he was munching hard crackers and jerked venison and luxuriating ahead to thoughts of a washed and shaved face and passage to Dalles City.

His luggage was all in Portland, where it would likely remain until one Galtry arrived with funds equal to a week's hotel bill. Yet, as he ate, encouragement flowed back into him. He returned to the store for a bottle of ale, and after he had drunk it he rested, watching the *Bellflower* assume the burden so recently laid down by the *Sellado*.

A LITTLE before eleven Galtry decided the time had come to get aboard, and now he possessed no such neat expedient as had been offered by one Chauncey Comstock. He pondered the simple problem of stowing himself away aboard the *Bellflower* and avoiding detection, at least until the packet was well under way. He strolled to the landing, now thickly covered by passengers, and mixed himself among them. A purser carefully guarded the gangplank, and a well tailored man, even though the tailoring be rumpled and his face darkened by a day's stubble, might arouse suspicions trying to go aboard with the cargo, farther down.

Presently Galtry made his way back to the store, and when he returned to the landing he carried a package. This time he boldly approached the sentry-like purser.

"Package for Mrs. Adamson," he said, with assurance. The purser moved to take charge of it, and Galtry resumed hurriedly, "It's collect. She sent us a boy with a note but no money." After a moment's thought the officer jerked his head, indicating that the delivery could proceed.

Galtry went up the gang plank with hammering heart, knowing that this was the first and probably simplest of the hurdles he had to take. He made his way up the companion to the passenger deck, then along an outer passage, then through the general cabin, hoping he had thus thrown pursuing eyes off his trail. He found a deck seat on the river side, where he sat down with his package.

He was like this when the *Bellflower* sent its hoarse whistle ricocheting along the high walls of the gorge. Galtry recognized many passengers, his patrons

of last evening, but doubted that they would recognize him in great coat, derby and a stubble. He did not see the Luces, but trusted them to play their parts well, once more, should he encounter them. The packet trembled, her great stern paddle began to turn, and she stood out into the stream.

WHEN she was well under way Galtry got up. It would be a smart thing now to remove the great coat and derby which the purser might recognize, should that individual be astute enough to recall one delivery boy had boarded but not quit the *Bellflower*. Before doing so it would be wisdom to go into the main cabin, since the deck grew even chillier as the breezes of steady motion fanned across them.

Galtry had not taken ten steps when a gruff voice behind him said, "Hey, you!"

Lex Galtry turned, knowing it would be the purser. And the man stood with long legs spread, big fists knotted and resting on either hip bone. Galtry smiled feebly.

"Mrs. Adamson didn't like it," he said.

Ten minutes later Galtry was in the captain's cabin, growing aware that he had failed to explain matters to the satisfaction of that individual.

"We're not turning back, but we'd ought to throw you off and let you swim ashore!" the master roared. "But I'll let you go on to Dalles City if you're willing to work your passage. We're short of stewards." He nodded to the purser. "Mr. Bladlow, take him to your cabin and let him shave and wash up. Then take him to cookie." He grinned at Galtry maliciously. "And when he's not running trays, he's to work in the scullery. In case you don't know what that is, Galtry, it's where we scrub our dishes and utensils."

And so was that Lex Galtry found himself again in menial service on a luxury steamboat sailing up the beautiful gorge of the Columbia. Less than an hour later, scrubbed, shaven, and white jacketed, he was receiving orders from a burly individual who supervised the feeding of the wayfarers. The chef pointed to a tray of highly polished silver, bearing sundry silver-domed platters and dishes.

"Take that to 7A, fellow. And remember, *I* put on the fancy touches. So the tip's mine."

Bearing the tray, Galtry made his way down the deep-piled carpet of the inner passageway between rows of numbered doors. This was A deck, and it was a simple matter to locate number seven. Galtry rapped, heard a low beckoning, balanced the tray and pushed open the door. He stepped into what he immediately recognized as one of the more sumptuous cabins. He lifted his eyes and stood stock still, staring. This was why cookie had made preemptory claim to the tip.

MURIEL DAMROCK was looking at him with the same fixity of interest. She had risen from a chaise-longue, a long leg outlining itself beneath pink silk with the motion.

"Your luncheon, m a d a m," said Galtry.

"Well, set it down." Her voice was low, husky, carrying, he thought, a quick upbeat of excitement. Galtry did as he was bidden, and as he started to go, Muriel Damrock spoke again. "Just a minute. On the *Sellado* you were the bar tender. On the *Bellflower* you are a steward. You seem to be a man of many parts."

"Many, indeed, madam," murmured Galtry. "It worries me, sometimes."

"And that ring," the woman said. "My brother belongs to that frater-

nity."

Their eyes met. Again Lex Galtry felt that deep disturbance in his nervous system. She wasn't smiling, yet the animation of her features gave him a warm glow. He liked her. He felt reasonably assured that she liked him.

"What's your name?"

"Lexington Galtry, madam. They call me Lex—down in the scullery." He bowed, backing. "If there's anything madam requires, she has only to ring."

"Look, Galtry. You can drop the madam. And the pretense. Last night on the other boat I thought you looked like you were on the wrong side of the bar. I don't know what your game is, but I may need someone desperately. How could I see you, if I wanted to?"

"This is your own state room?"

"Yes."

"Then I would say the simplest thing would be for madam to get hungry again. " He bowed and left.

A scullery, Galtry learned, was one thing not designed with an eye to sumptuousness. Amid rising steam he keeled the pots. He washed great stacks of dishes only to have new stacks of soiled ones replace them. He began to wonder if the master might not have been kinder to have pitched him overboard, as first threatened.

At the end of a couple of hours there came a welcome relief when the chef came to the scullery door and said, "Got another tray for you to run." He had been annoyed with Galtry ever since the latter failed to bring a tip back from 7A. He made that quite plain now. "That Damrock dame's hungry again. And this time, don't forget to hold out your hand!"

Galtry's heart skipped a few beats, took others in double time. So soon? He picked up the tray and hurried his steps into the plush-piled corridor and down it to 7A, realizing Muriel Damrock could not have eaten all the luncheon he had brought her and be hungry already.

He pushed open the door at bidding, and again stood stock still.

CHELLIS DAMROCK was seated where Muriel should have been, and Muriel was nowhere to be seen. Damrock smiled. "Put it down. Galtry. I don't want the damned stuff. My wife told me about you and how to get hold of you."

"Oh."

Lex Galtry set down the tray and tried to lift his spirits off the floor. So the clever enchantress had merely contrived a way to get him back here in her husband's interests. Damrock gestured him into a chair.

Then Galtry saw the other man, sitting in a recess in the inner bulk-head. A tall, thin man, sharp of eye and nose and chin. Galtry remembered now that both times he had seen Damrock, the evening before, this man had hovered in the background. A kind of bodyguard, perhaps.

"This is Mr. Jury," said Damrock. "Preston Jury. He always travels with me." He smiled. "Well, Galtry, what are you up to?"

Galtry was beginning to feel better. To have been sent for by Chellis Damrock was a thing in itself. Abruptly he realized there were flies in his webs, with himself off somewhere with kitchen utensils.

"That is a complex question," caged Galtry.

"I'll help you get a start on the answer. I gathered last evening that you know the Luces. And for some reason you are masquerading. Are you traveling with them?"

"No."

"How well do you know them?"

"Not well. We came up from Calif-

fornia together." He was feeling a mixture of new emotions. Chellis Damrock wanted desperately to know how Galtry stood with the Luces. But there was something deeper disturbing Galtry. This spidery man, over there in the corner . . . "Spencer Luce cleaned me at cards. And I wanted to get on up to Lewiston. So I'm working my way. That's all there is to it."

"Really?" There was plain disbelief in Damrock's eyes.

And then Galtry knew, and it came to him with staggering impact. Last night, the skinny silhouette! Suddenly he was glad that Damrock disbelieved him.

"I'm so stark broke," Galtry announced, "that last night I slept on the fan tail of the *Sellado,* under a pile of canvas."

The effect was electrifying. The pair exchanged long, deep glances. Then Damrock brought his eyes back to Galtry, smiling nervously.

"Are you on the level about playing your own game?"

"There's nobody's game I'd rather play."

"All right, Galtry. I see why you came on. And you win. At Dalles City you can get a boat back downriver. South America is a place where a young and personable man—with means, of course—can find life very beguiling. If you decide to take that down boat, Galtry, you could have in your possession a letter to a man in Portland that would be worth twenty-five thousand dollars to you. I can quite guarantee what I said about South America. I've been there."

GALTRY'S face had grown owlish in the effort to keep from betraying his feelings. Without so much as his shaking the tree, the golden apples had begun to fall. Yet he could see why, in part. Damrock thought he had come on solely to profit from having spied on certain activities of last evening. Damrock believed he understood what they were about far better than he really did. Yet he was suddenly not so sure he wanted to go along with Damrock. Knowledge bringing twenty-five thousand dollars so readily could bring double that with a little craft.

"And if I decide I don't care for siesta land?" he asked softly.

Chellis Damrock's eyes went cold. "That would be quite another matter. Quite another matter, indeed. See me before we reach Dalles City, if you're interested, and I'll give you that letter." With a wave of the hand he told Galtry he could go.

Returning to the galley, Galtry found his head reeling from new thinking. It gave him a creepy feeling to realize the abrupt rich promise carried with it a threat so cold and sinister.

SOME few miles below Dalles City the broad banks of the Columbia bent abruptly southward, with bordering, lower rock ledged banks to the left and a narrow, quarter moon plain to the right. Conifered vaults immediately changed to bare hills, immense and rolling and starkly sepian. In a long loop the course meandered back again until, three-four miles above the town, it touched the giant swirls of Big Eddy, where began a nine mile series of raging guts and growling rapids. From Dalles City to The Deschutes, some fifteen miles to the east, stretched the second portage, stairing to the upper river flight, along which shot fares and freight, borne by another portage train.

The *Bellflower* reached Dalles City shortly after four. Divers other craft stretched along the waterfront, patiently waiting while making interchange with team craft at the for end of the long portage. Yet the *Bellflower*

took the confusion with the poise of the lady she was, tying up to lap languidly at the landing, her passengers yet in leisured ease, while cargo trundled its way to the *Sandless,* distantly waiting at The Deschutes. After an unhurried dinner aboard the *Bellflower,* the passengers would make the long transfer to the sister packet.

This circumstance brought no restful pause to Lex Galtry. The chef, preoccupied with responsibilities of preserving his reputation through one more meal, grew brooding and short of temper. Which condition, as far as Galtry could see, only caused him to soil dishes and utensils with utter abandon. Then, as night began to fold down upon the river, he sharply summoned Galtry. Another tray awaited on the little preparing table.

"I wish I was a millionaire," the chef sighed. "All them people in 7A do is eat."

Galtry's ears alerted and his pulses leaped, then instant apprehension calmed him. Chellis Damrock was pressing for an answer, an answer Galtry had not found in considerable deeply concentrated thought. Galtry picked up the tray and set forth, depending on expedience to serve him again, as it had served him so faithfully in past pinches.

He stepped into 7A prepared to clash wills stubbornly with Chellis Damrock, and instantly found himself staring at the man's wife. Muriel Damrock was dressed, now, still in simple sleekness, and she smiled as she turned toward him.

"Put down the tray, Galtry. I've much to say, and little time for it. My husband talked to you?"

Galtry put the tray on the table and straightened. "Yes."

"Are you going to take him up on it?"

"I don't know yet."

A brooding look came into her wide eyes. "You must, Galtry. Take the money he's offered you and go. Far away. There's a boat leaving down river in two or three hours."

"Why should I?"

"To keep from being killed, for one thing. Believe me, I know, Galtry. I like you. Clear out."

THEIR glances held for a long moment, and again Galtry was aware of the leaping surge of his blood. "Why do you care?"

"I want you to take me with you." Her eyes held both excitement and defiance.

He stepped toward her involuntarily. Again they looked at each other in strange fixity. Galtry lifted his arms and she came into them slowly. As his arms tightened he felt her body stiffen briefly, in a last small spasm of reluctance and uncertainty, then her lips turned up to meet his. Galtry stepped back again, staring.

"I've known it since I first saw you," said Muriel Damrock.

Galtry laughed. "So you'd leave a millionaire for a bum like me!"

"Don't be too flattered, Galtry. I've got to get away from him. Chellis Damrock's castles are tumbling. I don't care to share that with him. And I'm afraid to go alone. As to funds, he's offered you twenty-five thousand dollars. And I have money. He's been generous, at least, and I've salted it away. Listen, Galtry. I was ashore a while ago. The *Hawk* leaves downriver at eight. We could be on it. We could reach Portland and I could draw this money from the bank before he could stop us. You could cash the letter he's willing to give you. We'll be fixed. I even bought tickets, Galtry. Two of them." Her voice mounted with excitement as she talked.

"Why is Chellis Damrock willing to

pay so handsomely to get rid of me?" Galtry asked.

"To cover a murder. Murder that I rather think will out. He'll pay you fifty thousand, if you ask for it. Take it, Galtry. He doesn't suspect what I've been planning. In an hour or so I'm going to slip away and aboard the *Hawk,* while you keep him and Jury occupied. I'll wait in my stateroom for you. And here's your ticket. Is it a deal, Galtry?"

Galtry took the ticket and completed his answer by moving forward and once more enfolding her in his arms.

THE scullery was an odious place of steam and clatter after that, but Galtry decided it was good as any other in which to think, which process found hard going in competing with memories of Muriel Damrock. But the dinner hour was at hand, now, with more trays to be run to sundry staterooms. Then Galtry came to the tray bearing nothing more than a glass of milk and a small plate of crackers, which, he was informed, went to 15A.

This door was opened for him, when he knocked, and once more Galtry found himself the theater of astonishment.

"Galtry!" said Shelby Luce. She beckoned him hastily to enter and swiftly closed the door. "Oh, Galtry! I hunted for you this morning at the portage, and I haven't dared to go out looking for you since! If only I'd got hungry before!"

Galtry put down the tray and grinned. "Trouble, huh? Where's Spence?"

The girl's eyes widened. "That's it, Galtry. I haven't seen Spence since last night. I thought maybe you'd know. Galtry, I'm afraid something's happened to him!"

For an instant it seemed to Galtry that he reeled physically. In a flash he saw everything, the silhouettes at labor on the benighted fan tail of the *Sellado,* the splash in the river. Spencer Luce! And all the while he had believed it was the distant murder of Waldo Luce that so galvanized Chellis Damrock!

"Damrock," said Galtry.

"Yes. Spence told me that if anything happened to him, I was to keep to my stateroom, get in touch with you, and go on through with his plans. Only, I couldn't find you. I have something to show you, Galtry." She moved to a valise, dug into it and brought forth a rolled paper, which she unrolled and spread on the top of a stand. "This shows the mineral land holdings of the Stardestry Mining Company, or, as it's popularly called, the Star Dust mine. It represents five years of patient and careful investigation on the part of Spencer Luce. And I'm afraid it's cost him his life, though Damrock doesn't know about it, yet."

GALTRY bent over the platt with interest. It showed evidence of much careful plotting and annotation. Yet it gave him a prickling feeling to look at it.

"Spence told me you overheard the discussion between him and Damrock, last night," the girl resumed. "As you probably guessed, Damrock is the mine promotor Waldo Luce took on the trip from which he never returned. The letter Waldo wrote Spence named him and also stated that Waldo had filed claim on his land. Which is responsible for all this." She touched the drawing. "Look, Galtry! Acres and acres of Damrock holdings, with an island in the very middle! That island is the site of the Star Dust mine! And there is nothing on record to show that title to it ever passed from Waldo Luce to Chellis Damrock."

"So the Star Dust is still Waldo Luce's—or Spence's—that is, yours?" Galtry was staring.

"Yes. But Spence never really cared much about that. He wanted to punish the man who killed his brother. And that's all I care about!" She pointed to the platt again, the island with its encircling colored squares. "Probably Damrock tried to get Waldo Luce to give him title to the claim, somehow, and failed. Something decided him against trying to forge one. So he set about acquiring all the surrounding land."

"Risky," said Galtry.

"Not when you think about it. Damrock knew Waldo Luce was inclined to be solitary and secretive. He figured there would simply be no one to make the exact surveying and checking required to reveal the fact that he did not own the small but extremely valuable area in the center of his holdings. It took the private investigator Spence hired two or three years to unearth all this, though he was handicapped by having to work in secrecy. Until suspicion was aroused somewhere, Chellis Damrock was completely safe. Yet, once it was aroused, he would be sunk. He figured the odds were so highly in his favor that he risked it."

GALTRY was forced, then, to confirm the girl's fears about her father, and he told her what he had witnessed the night before. She had expected it and took it bravely. "And now," he breathed, "you're the only one standing between Damrock and safety again." He instantly regretted that musing, and to cover it, he said quickly, "Spence Luce was a gambler. I wonder why he tipped his hand?"

"Because he *was* a gambler," Shelby answered dully. "You see, Spence didn't dare come up before he had everything ready, even by assuming a false name. He and Waldo Luce bore a striking physical resemblance to each other. Then there was the fact that Damrock had become rich and powerful. Spence was afraid that if he sprung it too soon, Damrock had a good chance of covering up by spending a lot of money where it would do the most good. Such things have been covered up before. So it was Spence's plan to slip in with his case all prepared and surprise Damrock with swift and sudden criminal proceedings. Then the whole scheme was upset when we ran smack into Chellis Damrock on the *Sellado*. We both knew Damrock recognized Spence. I suppose a murderer carries a pretty vivid picture of his victim for the rest of his life."

"Damrock recognized him," Galtry agreed. "I saw it in his eyes when he looked at Spence."

"It became a race, then, with everything depending on who got to Idaho first. That's where the gambler in Spence asserted itself. He tipped his hand boldly to frighten Damrock and puzzle him, hoping to make the man panicky and careless. Spence had a lot of cold courage. But I don't see how Damrock got the best of him."

"I do," Galtry said. "Damrock has a body guard, a very spidery gentleman named Preston Jury. That was an ace in the hole Spence probably didn't figure Damrock had."

"And a habit of Spence's apparently gave Damrock or his man an opportunity, which is why they acted so promptly. Spence never slept well. Often, on a boat at night, he'd go out on deck to smoke by himself for a long while. Damrock or Jury or both must have taken him in complete surprise." The girl frowned thoughtfully.

"Yes. A blackjack, and then some weights. If an alarm was raised about

Spence's disappearance, there'd be nothing to tie them in with it. But why didn't you go to the skipper when you began to suspect what had happened?"

"FOR two reasons, Galtry. In the first place, I could find neither you nor him, and I wasn't sure that the pair of you weren't up to something together. Then he'd told me that if anything ever happened I was to go on. I wasn't really worried until time wore on and I heard from neither of you." Her eyes went cold. "And now it's even more important than ever to expose Chellis Damrock!"

Galtry was ruminating mightily. Shelby was probably right about Spencer Luce having unwittingly presented Damrock with an opportunity for murdering him. But greater risks would have attended the murder of Shelby, which he doubtless yet meant to accomplish. And if Shelby had raised a fuss and voiced her suspicions, Galtry saw, Damrock could have given it the color of a gambler's daughter trying to rig a rich and well-known man. Likely he figured the girl less dangerous than the man, though probably even now he and his spidery accomplice were plotting how to take care of her.

Galtry was well aware of his own danger in the situation. Damrock thought he had been an eye witness to the disposition of the body. This, Galtry told himself, was a spot. On one hand he had the offer of considerable money and a ravishing woman, on the other the prospect of sudden death. After all the Luces had only been traveling acquaintances. And the *Hawk* sailed downriver at eight.

"I've got to go," he told Shelby. "All I can say is go on like your father told you. Stay out of sight. When you reach Idaho go directly to the authorities and present your case."

She looked at him a long moment, with a strange expression. "Yes. And thanks, Galtry. Thanks for letting me bother you with my troubles."

Galtry hurried his steps back to the galley. "With the time you take getting back here," said the chef, "I'm beginning to understand why you don't bring any tips."

WHEN dawn broke the next morning, the *Candless* was plodding steadily onward between the low brown hills of eastern Oregon and Washington. When Chellis Damrock entered the dining salon for his breakfast, he stared at the figure seated at a table near the foot of the companion.

Lex Galtry smiled at him. "Good morning, Mr. Damrock." He buttered a piece of toast. "And how is Mrs. Damrock, this morning?"

Chellis Damrock had obviously intended to eat alone, but he abruptly changed his mind and took the chair opposite Galtry. "What is this, Galtry? Do you know where Mrs. Damrock is?"

"Don't you?" Galtry noticed Preston Jury had taken a nearby table.

Damrock rapped the table cloth with carefully polished nails. He seemed very upset. "Galtry, I think I made it pretty clear where your interests lay."

"No, my friend. You under-rated me. You apparently don't know it, but your wife's deserted you because she knows you're a gone gosling. Regardless of your spidery friend and his sinister talents, I'm not one to pass up such an opportunity."

"So what now?"

"Your whole future depends on whether or not you can prevent Shelby Luce from starting an investigation that will uncover your two murders and your gigantic fraud. You don't know it, but she has documentary evidence that will ruin you in spite of everything you

do. It won't even do you any good to kill her."

"Why not?"

"Because she turned that evidence over to me, my fine friend!"

The coppery beard was trembling, and Chellis Damrock's lambent eyes narrowed. "You'll sell this to me? I presume you mean Waldo Luce's letter to his brother."

"That, and more. Spencer Luce has carefully prepared a platt of your holdings on the Sandestry property. The map shows a mighty big hole, smack in the center, Damrock!"

"No!" The man was thoroughly shaken. "He *was* clever!"

Galtry nodded. "But too daring. So I wouldn't lay a hand on his daughter, my friend. That's one of the benefits I mean to derive from possessing Luce's platt. It's the platt that's dangerous to you, not Shelby Luce. A man of your influence has a better than even chance of refuting anything she might charge but can't support with evidence."

"Yes, I know. Very well, Galtry. Name your price."

Galtry rose from the table. "That I'm not yet ready to do, Damrock." He bowed, and before the other could speak again, turned and hurried away.

GALTRY went out on deck, and paused at the rail to light a cigarette thoughtfully. He was well aware that he had thrown the fat into the fire, but he was confident that he had succeeded in the first part of the intention. Damrock's baleful interest was removed from Shelby, at least for the time being. It would be several hours before they reached Lewiston, and before then Damrock would decide that he need not pay for Spencer Luces platt so long as the possibility existed that it could be secured by craft or by force.

Galtry did not deceive himself that the hand he held was perfect. It might be very difficult to pin the two charges on a man of Chellis Damrock's position. And unless this could be accomplished, Damrock might even succeed in making the question of title to the Sandestry property a matter of long legal proceedings, which Shelby would not have the money to finance.

But Chellis Damrock was alarmed and rattled, now, and not inclined to weigh his position coolly enough to see this and be willing to take his chances. The instinct of self-preservation would likely prompt him to take more violent and final measures that would permanently remove the menace to his well being. This would call for three more steps to be taken before the *Candless* reached Lewiston; to wit: the murder of Shelby Luce, Lexington Galtry, and the destruction of Spencer Luce's drawing. The equation being what it was, item one would seem the least pressing necessity. In the showdown over items two and three, Chellis Damrock might be tricked into sticking his neck into the noose irrevocably.

The prospect did nothing to promote quietude in the spirit of Lex Galtry. He flipped his half-smoked cigarette out over the water, his eyes studious. He had not seen Shelby Luce since the evening before, and she doubtless thought him well on his way down river, frightened out by what she had told him. In spite of what he had said to Damrock, the Platt was still in her possession, which was a nice safe place for it as long as Damrock thought one Lex Galtry had it. Galtry grinned to himself when he thought how Damrock had unwittingly bought this passage, saving Galtry from further menial labors, for at Dalles City Galtry had traded the downriver ticket Muriel Damrock gave him for an upward passage.

Galtry flicked a glance upward at

the pilot house, turned thoughtfully and climbed the ladder. He spent a half hour talking to the packet master, and when he descended again, he went immediately to his cabin.

HE HAD been in his stateroom only a short while when a low rap sounded on the door. His pulses energizing, Galtry crossed to open it. Chellis Damrock stood in the passageway, with Preston Jury just behind him, both of them obviously anxious not to be seen.

"Let us come in, Galtry," Damrock said. "We've got to wind up this deal."

Galtry stood back, letting them pass. He knew what was coming before it happened. Damrock moved on into the cabin, but Jury stopped just inside the door. His hand moved suddenly, and Galtry felt pressure in his ribs. He dropped a glance to see it was not the gun he expected but a knife with a short, sharp blade. Jury kicked the door shut, stretched an arm to turn the key. A grin of triumph showed on the man's emaciated face, which Galtry did not destroy by announcing that he not only had expected this, he had hoped for it.

At Jury's nod, Galtry followed Chellis Damrock across the stateroom.

"Why all the precautions?" Galtry asked. "Don't you trust me?"

Not by a long shot!" Jury snapped. "And if you let a peep out of you, you're a struck hog!"

"We want those documents you were talking about, Galtry," Damrock said. Let's see them."

Not on your life!" Galtry returned. How do I know your friend won't stick me, anyhow, once you get your hands on what you want?"

"That you can't know!" Jury jeered. "We don't have to have the papers. You and the Luce girl're the only ones who know they exist!"

"Oh. So you really came here to kill me. How do you expect to get away with it?"

"A knife makes little sound," Chellis Damrock cut in, his fingers stroking his beard. "No one saw us come in here. We'll make certain no one sees us leave."

"You're bluffing!" Galtry snapped. "Neither one of you has the nerve!"

"Waldo Luce made that mistake," said Damrock, grinning. "So did his brother."

"And I suppose you expect to kill Shelby Luce!"

"My friend, both of you are far too dangerous to live!"

Chellis Damrock moved forward suddenly, a big hand whipping the handkerchief from his breast pocket which he clamped over Galtry's mouth. For an instant, Galtry's heart hammered against his ribs, as he realized that they planned to waste no time.

Then a cool voice said, "Lift your hands, gentlemen!"

The pair whirled in amazement and alarm. A man wearing the braided uniform of a steamboat captain stood behind them, holding a snub-nosed pistol in his hand which was pointed at them unwaveringly. Their eyes swerved from him to the door, which was still shut and apparently still locked. There had been no sound.

"Wrong door!" the captain announced cheerfully. "I just stepped out of the clothes closet, behind that curtain. The things I heard, gentlemen! I'm afraid I'll have to put you under lock and key until we reach Lewiston!"

THE *Candless* had turned into Snake River, and Shelby Luce and Lex Galtry were standing at the rail, though they paid scant heed to the passing scenery.

The girl was looking at Galtry soberly. "I admit I was pretty angry when I thought you were running out on me, Lex Galtry. How does a girl thank a man for doing all that to protect her dainty hide?"

"There are numerous ways. Being a pretty girl, she could kiss him. Being a rich woman, she could marry him and keep him in luxury the rest of his days."

Shelby smiled. "I see you as almost anything but a fortune hunter, Galtry. I believe you told me on the boat up from California that you have a father that's filthy rich. Owns a few railroads and banks, I believe. Since you ran out on all that, I can't see you marrying a woman for her money."

"I wouldn't, my pretty maid. I'm afraid that one day I'll have as much money as you're going to have pretty soon. So I'm afraid we'll just have to marry for love."

"Do you mean it, Lex?"

He lifted her chin with his forefinger, and his expression had turned serious. "Yes, Shelby. For reasons that I hope will remain unknown to you, I did a lot of thinking last night before I left the *Bellflower*. I found myself tempted to do something pretty cheap. Yet it was something I couldn't sell myself on. I hated the life my father cut out for me. Yet it looks different, now. Money's a mighty big responsibility. He was right in trying to train me for that, even if he did train a bit too hard. I saw how it was when I learned the hellish extremes people will go to get or keep the stuff."

"Oh!" the girl moaned. "And now I'm going to be rich!"

Galtry nodded. "Yes, and I'm afraid I'll be, too. It's tough, but we've got to face it. We'll straighten your affairs out first. If we do a good job of it, we'll go back home and strut our new capabilities and maybe get me forgiven. We can cut it, if we love each other enough. For my part, it's practically pouring out my ears."

"Oh-h-h! If you don't kiss me, Lex Galtry, I'm going to explode!"

He had a lot more to tell her, but it struck him suddenly that what she suggested conveyed the whole idea, and he quickly obliged.

END

FOOTPRINTS IN THE WEST
THE MORMON MARCH

By H. R. STANTON

ONE of the most amazing spectacles seen in the westward march across the flat plains of this vast land was the Mormons, by the thousands, pushing their own wagons mile after mile. The hand carts were built on the model of the covered wagon; in place of the oxen, father and son or husband and wife furnished the power of locomotion. Oxen were expensive, the original Mormon Immigration Fund had been exhausted, and they desired to bring the maximum number of immigrants West at a minimum cost.

In order to escape the violence which was directed against them everywhere in the East and to achieve the peace and security which they knew lay only in Utah, these Mormon families were willing to give their lives, . . . and in many cases it meant just that. The hardships of the journey were unbearable for many, and there was a great deal of illness and death among the brave participants of the venture. The companies which started in late summer found themselves caught in the mountains by snowstorms short of provisions. Deaths multiplied until it was necessary to form a burial squad.

The pathetic picture of hungry men, women, and children plodding wearily onward in the face of all their deprivations and misery was seared in the memory of many an inhabitant of the West. One of the last companies to set out on foot completed their arduous journey in 1859. The years that followed found oxen more plentiful in Utah and the Mormons in better financial straits, able to ride instead of walk into their Promised Land of Hope.

KNIVES DON'T MISFIRE

By S. M. Tenneshaw

IN THE red haze of a desert twilight a man was silhouetted against the sky. He sat upon a roan, his arms lashed behind him, head bare, with his hair curling back from his forehead as a cool evening breeze sprang up from the mountains to the west. Around his neck the loose coil of a lariat snaked up and over the low hanging bough of a cottonwood.

About him a small group of riders waited expectantly. Upon their faces was the cold deadly sternness of men awaiting death. They had eyes for only one person. The man upon the roan.

At their backs, down the trail leading

He came into a country where hot lead was law—all he had was a knife. Could he pit it against lead and win?

up to the knoll, another person was watching the scene. He sat stiffly in his saddle, a red stubble beard hiding the greater part of his features, one hand resting tensely against the butt of a forty-five. In his eyes there was puzzlement and a deeply hidden bitterness. It showed in his mouth where the corners twitched downward and even the beard couldn't hide it. He was a tall man, lean and hard. The horse he rode was streaked with sweat and dust and a faint line of foam stood on its muzzle. He had ridden a long way.

He looked up the knoll and at the small group of men with their backs to him, huddled around the man on the roan. The man with the rope around his neck. Even at a distance there was something familiar about him—the way he sat—his hair blowing in the evening wind.

Very deliberately, very cautiously, he edged his trail-weary horse within earshot.

"You've been found guilty of branding rustled stock, Stevens. Yuh got anythin' to say before Sheriff Talbot carries out the sentence?"

The words fell upon the listening man's ears and the muscles in his face grew taut. He watched as the condemned man twisted his head.

"Yes, I've got something to say, Callows."

Memories seared through the listener's mind at the mention of that name. Almost convulsively his right hand tightened around the gun in his holster. He knew those men up there. Even with their backs to him. Even though ten years had creased a path of pain through his life. He knew them.

The man upon the roan. The man with the rope around his neck. The man about to die. Burt Stevens. . . . He remembered nights around a campfire years before when he and Burt Stevens had shared blankets and coffee. Memories of riding herd on the Kittredge spread, the largest in the valley past *Cinco Robles* to the West. Memories of nights when he and Stevens smoked cigarettes in firelight and the soft voice of a wiry little mexican, Juan Corsando, sang and strummed softly on a battered guitar. He remembered.

"I know it won't do me any good to say I'm innocent," he heard Stevens say bitterly. "I never fixed a brand in my life, and you all know it! I told you I was riding out for strays when I saw smoke coming from the shanty in Cat Gulch. When I rode up two men hightailed it out — *they* had been heatin' irons! I didn't get a chance to see who they were—but I got a good idea. . . .

"It was me that stamped out the fire, and I was headin' back to the Double Y when—"

"When yuh was caught red handed!" The man called Callows shot back. "Right on my own land. Sheriff Talbot was right there as a witness—there was nobody else around! Just because you ride for John Kittredge maybe yuh thought yuh could get away with it! Well, yuh didn't, and Kittredge will be the next man tuh swing!"

THE listener hunched forward in his saddle and his eyes scanned the hanging party. Of the ten men, mounted and waiting, there were three who he knew. Britt Callows, who had been a tinhorn gambler in *Cinco Robles* ten years back, Sheriff Talbot, whiskey-nosed law enforcer of the town whose badge had always gone to the biggest gun in power, and Judge Reeves. It was Judge Reeves who had issued the warrant for Blade Rivers' arrest, dead or alive, for murder.

"Yuh can hang me, Callows," Burt Stevens voice drifted down to the listener, "but don't think this is going to

settle anything. John Kittredge will be gunning for you. . . . You've come a long way since you had Blade Rivers run out of the country, but every step you've made has cost an honest man his ranch or his life! If hanging is goin' to help put lead in your rotten carcass—then I'm glad to die!"

The listener watched Britt Callows hitch his hands in a diamond studded belt. His features were turned sideways, and Blade Rivers, watching and listening down the trail, caught a glimpse of the man's hawkish features. A burning hate spread through Rivers at sight of that face.

"He's had his little say, Sheriff. Let's get it over with," Callows said.

Rivers watched as the Sheriff moved his horse forward and dismounted. As he approached the roan that held Burt Stevens, Blade Rivers saw him shuffle unsteadily. Rivers didn't have to be that close to know there was whiskey in the man's legs.

The Sheriff's right hand slapped sharply on the rump of the roan. The horse snorted and charged forward. The rope around Burt Stevens' neck grew taut.

There were two blasts from a forty-five in the twilight. The rope around the condemned man's neck flew apart even as it jerked the man from the saddle. Burt Stevens landed on the ground in a tumbled heap. Simultaneously the lynching party swung around, hands flying toward holsters.

"I wouldn't try anything like that!" Blade Rivers called out sharply and rode into the circle, a smoking forty-five held menacingly.

Hands stopped dead still at their holsters. Eyes burned furiously.

"Who the hell are you?" Britt Callows ground out, his eyes flaming.

Blade Rivers fixed his gaze on the hawkish features of Callows. Ten years hadn't changed the man, he thought. But then, Callows hadn't drifted from town to town with a price on his back. He didn't know what it was to be hunted, to have every man with a star on his shirt an emissary of death. No, Callows hadn't changed.

"Reckon I'm just a man who don't like hangings," Rivers said.

A FAT stubby man in a black parson's coat with a dirty white shirt and loosely tied black bow tie, moved his horse forward jerkily. Rivers recognized him. It was Judge Reeves.

"But this man is a rustler! He's been tried and found guilty—you're buttin' your nose against the law stranger! . . . Just who are you?"

Rivers smiled grimly behind his red stubble beard. Had he changed so much in the past ten years that these men who had made his life a hunted decade of terror didn't recognize him? He almost felt like laughing in their faces and telling them and then start pumping lead.

"The name is—John Grady . . . not that it means anythin' to you. And as for justice, this here rannie don't seem to think he's getting it."

Britt Callows cut his horse in front of the Judge and Rivers watched his hand sidle toward his holster. "If I was you, Mr. Grady, I'd keep my nose clean in these parts. We don't like strangers tellin' us what to do—even men who can shoot a forty-five like you. Savvy?"

On the ground, Burt Stevens was painfully crawling to his feet. His face was covered with dirt and his hair was mussed down over his forehead in a black mass. Blood trickled down his chin from a cut on his mouth. Rivers saw the look of blank astonishment on his face, but there was no recognition in Stevens' eyes.

"Sorry you had to get messed up like that," Rivers spoke slowly, watching Stevens' face intently. There was still no recognition there.

Stevens spat dirt and blood from his mouth. "Reckon I owe you my life, stranger. Don't know why—"

His voice broke off in mid-sentence and his eyes switched around Rivers' horse. "Look out behind you—the Sheriff—"

Rivers spun in his saddle, his gun hand raising. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the whiskey laden sheriff coming at his rear. A harsh voice froze him in the saddle.

"Hold it, Grady, I'll blast you if you make a move!"

It was Britt Callows' voice, and Rivers, turning his eyes to the gambler, saw him holding a six-gun pointed at his heart. Rivers froze.

"Drop your gun, Grady—fast!"

Rivers dropped his gun and it fell with a dull thud on the grassy knoll. Something else fell with it, his heart. But they didn't hear that.

"Get his gun, Sheriff," Callows drawled.

Rivers watched as Talbot shuffled unsteadily around his horse and picked up his gun. Callows reached down and took it from Talbot's hand.

"All right, Grady, now get down off that horse." Callows said.

Rivers eased from his saddle and stood spread-legged on the ground. He looked up at Callows. There was a sneer on the hawkish features of the man.

"Now we'll get on with the hanging you interrupted, Grady. We'll even use your horse."

This brought a snickering laugh from the rest of the riders. It also brought a cold fury to Rivers. But he knew his chance was now gone. There was nothing he could do.

SHERIFF Talbot had Rivers' horse. He drew it up along side the cottonwood, and in the gathering twilight, caught a lariat thrown by another member of the hanging party and threw one end over the low hanging bough of the tree.

Across from Rivers, Burt Stevens muttered: "It just wasn't in the cards, Grady. I don't know who you are, or why you did it, but after this is over you'll be doing me a bigger favor if you see my boss, John Kittredge. If you're looking for a job—and don't mind hunting down skunks like Callows here, you'll find a steady berth at the Double Y."

Britt Callows voice laughed harshly. "Maybe I'll have somethin' to say about that!—You ready, Sheriff?"

Talbot was placing the new noose over Burt Stevens' head and shoving him toward the horse. Rivers stood helplessly by and could only watch as the condemned man was helped into the saddle. As Talbot stepped toward the rear of the horse, Rivers felt his blood freeze. Under the watchful six-gun of Callows he was being forced to see an old friend hanged. Hanged for something that Rivers knew he had never done. Hanged by the same men who had put a price on his own head.

"Let's get it over with, Sheriff," Callows drawled.

Talbot muttered gruffly and stepped behind the horse with his hand raised. Every muscle in Blade Rivers' body tensed as he watched that hand.

It never dropped.

A volley of shots split the air, and after them, the thrumming beat of approaching hoofbeats.

Britt Callows cursed wildly and spun in his saddle, six-gun poised. In the thickening dusk Rivers turned and followed Callows' gaze.

Up the knoll came a group of riders,

guns glinting in the fading light. At their head rode a huge man, hatless, a thick mane of dark hair flying in the wind. With his free hand he held the stock of a Winchester. It looked like a toy in his hand, but from the way he held it, it was a toy that could spit sudden death.

Behind him came a dozen riders, all with ready guns. And then Blade Rivers' eyes narrowed in surprise. One of them was a girl. She sat straight in her saddle, a six-gun dwarfing the small white hand that held it, pale gold hair shimmering in the desert twilight, and as her features turned toward him, he saw a pair of blue eyes that were cold and furious.

The big man pulled in his horse just short of the cottonwood and his hands fondled the Winchester.

"What's going on here!" His voice boomed in the sudden silence. "Sheriff! Who's responsible for this?"

BLADE Rivers took in the man with the Winchester. John Kittredge had changed in ten years. His face was lined with hardship and worry, and now that he was closer, Rivers could see the streaks of gray that tinged his hair. But there was nothing of defeat in the big man's eyes. They burned with rage.

Rivers watched the Sheriff swallow uneasily. His watery eyes turned up to Britt Callows for help. The gambler's voice answered drily.

"I'm to blame, Kittredge—if you want to call it that." He turned to the girl who had pulled up beside the big man. "Too bad you have to witness this, Miss Kittredge . . . " Rivers caught the difference in tone that Callows used addressing the girl. Unconsciously his eyes turned to her. He felt a tremor of unease sweep through him as he found her gazing steadily at him, with a crown creasing the smoothness of her forehead.

"Your foreman, Stevens, was caught on my land with branding irons this afternoon," Callows continued, his voice cold again. "He's been tried and sentenced to hang. You've got no right to interfere!"

John Kittredge's face purpled angrily. "That's a damned lie, and you know it!" The big man shot back. "I sent Stevens out hunting strays in the gulch—my strays! If a couple of my boys hadn't been in town and heard about this you might have been able to railroad Burt!"

Beside Callows, Judge Reeves straightened indignantly in his saddle. "I'd be mighty careful making accusations like that, Kittredge—Stevens was given a fair trial according to law, and—"

Burt Stevens shouted: "Whose law? The law that makes Britt Callows judge jury and executioner in Cinco Robles? What kind of a chance did you give me —go on, tell them!"

Judge Reeves was sweating. Even in the fading light Rivers could see that. Like the Sheriff, he turned uneasy eyes toward Callows. Callows drawled menacingly.

"What the Judge says is true. Stevens was given a fair trial. You're buckin' the law by buttin' in, Kittredge."

There was a sharp click as the Winchester cocked in the big man's hands.

"Then I'm buttin' in! Shorty, cut Burt down!"

There was a momentary electric silence. Only the sound of the wind stirred around them. It whistled through the cottonwood tree in a dismal moan. Then one of the Kittredge riders spurred forward toward Burt Stevens.

Callows gave a signal to his men. Hands grew taut on six-guns. Rivers knew that within seconds lead would be flying.

At that moment Judge Reeves moved his horse between the two gun-tense parties. There were large beads of sweat on his face and his shirt collar was wet with it. He waved a pudgy hand nervously.

"Hold it! Bloodshed isn't going to settle anything! . . . " He turned to Callows who was glaring at him. "After all, Britt, if Kittredge here vouches for Stevens, well, maybe there is something to his story . . ."

There was murder in Callows eyes as he glared at the Judge. "What're yuh tryin' tuh say—*you* was the one that sentenced him!"

Reeves winced visibly. He bit his lips to keep them steady. "What I mean is, maybe it would be better if I issued a reprieve—until we find out more . . ."

The man called Shorty had paused beside Burt Stevens, knife held ready. All eyes switched to Callows. The gambler's hawkish features were taut with rage. Then suddenly his face relaxed and he lowered his gun.

"It's your responsibility, Judge. You asked for it. Go on, issue your reprieve —*you're* the law."

Rivers didn't miss the sarcasm in Callows' voice. The Judge didn't either. But he let out a visible sigh of relief and motioned to the Kittredge rider.

"You can cut him down."

WHILE Stevens was being released, Blade Rivers' eyes strayed to the girl. She was looking at him, and he could read a wondering puzzlement in her face. She had changed a lot in ten years from the pig-tailed girl who had sat on the ranchhouse steps of the Double Y and clapped gleefully as he threw his twin diamond studded knives at a fence post thirty feet away. It was one of those very knives that had put a price on Rivers' head. The memories came back to him in fleeting passages of pain as he looked at her. The night he and Juan Corsando, the little mexican who had raised him when his parents were killed in a train wreck on the border, had gone to town and gotten drunk. The fight he had with one of Callows' cappers in a card game. And the next morning back at the ranch when Betty came to watch him practice with his knives and they were gone. And one of them was found in the back of the capper. Sordid memories. And now he was looking at her, not the pig-tailed little girl of twelve, but a grown woman. And she was looking at him . . .

Blade Rivers started as someone came up beside him and touched his arm. It was Burt Stevens.

"I guess I owe my life to you,—Grady. Funny, I keep thinking I've seen you someplace . . ."

Rivers cut his hat down sharply. "Reckon I did only what I thought was right."

John Kittredge pulled up beside them. "What's all this, Burt?"

Stevens pointed to Rivers. "If it hadn't been for Grady here, I'd have swung sure. He broke up the party long enough for you to get here."

Kittredge leaned forward in his saddle, the Winchester slung under his right arm. "That so? I reckon we owe you some thanks, Mr. Grady.

Blade Rivers shrugged, keeping his face turned. "I just had a hunch, I guess. Happened to work out right." He turned to Callows, staring down at him. "And now if you'll hand over my gun, I'll be on my way."

Callows looked at him for a long moment. Then silently handed Rivers his gun. As Rivers slid the six-gun into his holster, Callows drawled slowly.

"If you got nuthin' else to do, Grady, I'd like a little talk with you. I own the Rio Grande Saloon in town. You kinda look like you could use a drink."

THERE was another movement at Blade Rivers' side. He looked up into the blue steady eyes of Betty Kittredge. "If I were you, Mr. Grady, I wouldn't take up with Britt Callows—even for a drink. You saw right here what kind of a man he is . . . and if you're looking for a job, my father . . ."

Kittredge scowled. "My daughter's right, Grady. And if you are looking for a berth I'd be mighty glad to take you on."

Rivers fought down the impulse to say yes. He had come back from Cinco Robles for a reason. He couldn't forget it.

"Thanks just the same," Rivers replied. "But I think I'll keep moving on." He turned to Callows. "In the meantime I'll take you up on that drink in town."

He could feel the girl staring down at him. Then suddenly she rowelled her horse away. Beside him, Stevens was mounting the roan. The Double Y foreman was looking at him with a frown.

"I think you're making a big mistake, Grady."

Rivers turned away without answering. As Stevens spurred his horse he heard John Kittredge address Callows.

"Don't think you're fooling anybody by trying to pin rustling charges on any of my men, Callows. The ranchers in this valley have been losing too many cattle lately, and if the law won't protect our rights, then we'll do a little law making ourselves!"

A cloud of dust swallowed the Kittredge riders moments later as they swung off the knoll and down the trail. Night was settling fast, in scant minutes it would be dark. Already the evening breeze was turning cold and overhead a blanket of stars were peeping out from their twilight bed.

Callows motioned Rivers to his horse. "Come along, Grady. We're headin' for town."

Blade Rivers smiled under his red stubble beard. It was not a nice smile. But only Rivers knew it was there. He glanced back over his shoulder as they rode past the cottonwood. The empty rope was swinging in the wind, empty, and waiting.

THE Rio Grande Saloon was doing a thriving business. As Blade Rivers eased through the batwings he took in the noise of laughing cowmen, the clink of chips at poker tables, steins and glasses banging on the bar, and the bellow of a number of drunks stamping around beside a piano player, monotonously beating out chords. Behind Rivers, Britt Callows, the Sheriff, and Judge Reeves followed. They walked to the bar.

Rivers hooked one foot along the brass rail and leaned his elbows on the bar, looking into the mirror behind it. He was able to scan the room this way without turning his head. Beside him Britt Callows drawled: "What'll it be, Grady?"

"Whiskey," Rivers answered mechanically. In the mirror he could see the Sheriff nodding the same to the bartender, and next to him, Judge Reeves nervously mopping his forehead with a silk handkerchief.

"You'd better have something too, Judge," Callows said acidly. "Maybe it'll help get some of your nerve back."

The Judge twisted his bulky body sideways and looked at Callows. There was almost stark fear in his eyes. "What else could I do?" he moaned. "In another minute shooting would have started — and somebody would have gotten hurt . . . "

Callows sneered. "Yuh mean maybe you would have gotten hurt, is that it, Judge? You was looking out for your own skin!"

The bartender put an open bottle of whiskey before them and four glasses. As he poured, Rivers saw the Sheriff licking his lips hungrily. "The Judge ain't all to blame, Britt," Talbot muttered, reaching for his glass. "This Grady hombre is the man that tipped the cards agin us."

Rivers was aware of the beady glint in the Sheriff's eyes. The same kind of a glint a snake might have. Very deliberately Rivers dropped his right hand from the bar and let it hang against his holster. He continued to look into the mirror.

Callows' eyes found Rivers in the mirror, "What the Sheriff says is true, Grady. You kinda made yourself unpopular by buttin' in."

Rivers returned his gaze steadily. "Then why bother buying me a drink?"

Callows smiled thinly. "Maybe it's because I like the way you handle a forty-five. That was a pretty piece of shooting. A man has to use a gun mighty often to shoot like that . . ."

Rivers caught the subtle hint of a question in Callows' words. He ignored it deliberately, picking up his glass and draining it. The whiskey burned a warm path to his stomach.

Callows continued to smile. "Have another. . . . Yuh know, we ain't too particular about a man's past in this town, where the law's concerned—if he's teamed up on the right side."

RIVERS reached for the bottle and poured himself another shot. Then his eyes met Callows again in the mirror. "That's interesting. Meaning your side?"

Callows hawkish features widened into a grin, showing a set of even white teeth. "You catch on quick, Grady. I run this town, what I say goes. I can make a man or just as easily break him. Ask the Sheriff or Judge Reeves here."

Rivers flicked his eyes to the two law enforcers of Cinco Robles. Their eyes dropped guiltily to their glasses and Rivers saw there two men whose lives were enslaved and dictated by the man beside him.

The piano player had stopped playing. In the mirror Rivers saw him getting up and taking an empty beer glass back to the bar. The absence of music brought a nervous tension to Rivers. He didn't know why.

He was aware that the Sheriff was talking to Britt Callows, and that Judge Reeves was mopping his forehead again. And then he became aware of something else. The sudden strumming melody of a guitar, and a man's voice singing softly in Spanish.

"Un pajaro que abondonar su primer, nido, su primer, nido . . ."

Blade Rivers stiffened. That voice . . . Vague memories of nights around a campfire rose again in his mind, just as they had risen when he first saw Burt Stevens about to be hung. He saw a little wiry Mexican, firelight playing over his weathered skin, strumming softly and singing. . . . Rivers twisted slowly at the bar.

He saw him in the far corner of the room, sitting at a table next to a door. There was an empty bottle in front of him, and the curling smoke of a half-burned cigarette. He was sitting there, a wiry little Mexican, face lined with age, hair grayed and unkempt, his levis clothes faded and torn. He was sitting with his head resting against the wall at his back, one leg propped up against an empty chair beside him, the guitar held across his thigh, and playing. His eyes were half closed as he sang, and Rivers couldn't tell whether it was from weariness or drink.

A name climbed to his lips. A cry, trembling with emotion. But it died there. Juan! *Juan!*

RIVERS became aware suddenly that Britt Callows had turned and was looking at him. Rivers pulled his gaze away from the Mexican.

"Always liked that song." Rivers said, turning back to the bar.

Callows nodded.

"Who's the mick?" Rivers kept his voice even.

Callows shrugged. "Just a tramp named Juan Corsando. I let him play here. A cheap bottle of liquor and he's happy. Gives my piano player a rest and some of the customers like his songs. Used to be tied up with a killer years back."

Rivers' jaw muscles tightened under his beard. He reached for his drink. "On your side?"

The gambler's thin lips grew tight. "No. That's why I let him mooch here. Personal reasons. Why?"

Rivers shrugged, draining his glass. "No particular reason. Well, thanks for the drink. I'll be getting along."

He started to turn, and then felt Callows hand on his arm. "You in any special hurry?"

Rivers looked at him. "No particular hurry. Why?"

"Your horse looks like you've come a long way."

"Maybe."

"Looking for a job?"

"That all depends."

Callows' smile faded. "You don't say very much for a man who butts into other people's business."

Rivers let a grim smile pull at his lips. "Talk is cheap, Callows, unless there's something in it."

The gambler frowned slightly. Rivers knew he was being sized up and weighed. He waited.

Then Callows was smiling again. "I like a man who can keep his mouth shut. Want to step in my office for a little talk? Might be worth your while."

Across from Callows, Rivers could see the Sheriff listening and scowling as he poured whiskey for himself. And Judge Reeves was using his handkerchief again. Rivers shrugged. "I got time."

Callows turned abruptly and strode away from the bar. Rivers followed him toward the far end of the room and the door set in the wall.

The Mexican was still playing. His head was still perched against the wall, and his foot still straddling the chair in front of him. As Callows approached, he kicked the chair out of his way with a snarl.

"I told you before not to block my office, you damned Mex!"

The little man stumbled to his feet, holding the guitar in both hands. His eyes lowered and he mumbled words.

"I am sorry, *senor* . . . I did not see you come . . ."

CALLOWS muttered profanity under his breath and opened the office door. Behind him, Blade Rivers trembled angrily. As he passed the Mexican, Juan's eyes raised suddenly to his. Rivers had to force himself to keep walking ahead through the door. Had there been a faint flicker in those black eyes?

Callows shut the door behind him and motioned toward a chair. His face was composed once more.

Rivers looked over the office. There was a single large glass-topped desk in the middle of it, with a leather swivel chair behind it next to a window. Through the window he saw the faint dark outline of an adjoining building. There was an expensive broadloom rug on the floor and a long leather couch against one wall. Chairs were grouped around the desk. Rivers sank into one.

Callows seated himself behind the

desk and shoved a cigar box along the glass top. Rivers waved it aside and drew a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He watched as Callows pulled back the box and picked out a long black cheroot, lighting up.

"What's on your mind, Callows?"

The gambler looked at him for long steady moments. Then he blew smoke at the ceiling lamp in a long stream.

"I don't usually hanker to strangers, Grady, especially men that cross me." He let that sink in for a moment, then: "But I like the way you handle yourself, especially with a gun. I take it you don't care too much for law?"

Rivers sucked in on his cigarette. "I got no reason to, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean." Callows leaned forward across the desk. "This is a rich cattle country, Grady, right along the border. And there's plenty of money to be made selling cattle to the right people—across it."

Rivers nodded slowly. "If you have the cattle."

Callows' eyes flickered. ". . . I've got 'em. But I need men who can handle a gun and aren't afraid to use it."

Rivers straightened in his chair. "That the proposition?"

Callows nodded and abruptly ground out his cigar in an ash tray. Then he drew a leather wallet from his pocket, took a number of bills from it and laid the wallet on the desk.

Rivers wasn't looking at the bills in Callows' hand. He was looking at the wallet. Set in the leather was a large diamond. It caught the rays from the ceiling light and sent scintillating streaks of rainbow flame from its surface.

"Here's a little on account, there'll be more if you do your work right."

Rivers took the bills automatically, his eyes still on the diamond.

"That's a mighty fine stone," he said.

The gambler picked up the wallet, his eyes suddenly narrowed. "Yes, it is. Won it in a card game some years back . . . We understand each other?"

Rivers ground out his cigarette. "Reckon we do. No questions asked?"

"No questions asked. I'll have the Judge show you the hotel. You can get a room there. I'll see you in the morning—"

CALLOWS' voice broke off as a scuffle and loud bellow sounded from outside the office door. Callows jumped to his feet and raced around the desk. Rivers beat him to the door.

The Sheriff was standing outside, holding the Mexican by the throat. He had the little man on his knees and was shaking him like a rug. Over his shoulder, Talbot bellowed out to Callows: "Caught him listening by the door, Britt! You dirty sneakin' little greaser—I'll teach yuh!"

Rivers didn't bother trying to pull Talbot away from the Mexican. He simply lashed out with a hundred eighty pounds of bone and muscle and hit Talbot on the side of the jaw.

There was a loud crack as his knuckles connected with bone, and then suddenly Talbot wasn't holding onto the Mexican anymore. He was sliding across the floor and crashing into a table.

Beside Rivers, the Mexican was trying to get to his feet, his face purple, his hands trying to claw air into his tortured throat. Almost in the same instant the Sheriff was clambering to his feet, his hand darting to his holster.

"I wouldn't try that, Sheriff," Rivers' voice cracked out. In a swift movement, his hand held a forty-five. The Sheriff swore murderously. But he didn't draw.

Behind Rivers, Britt Callows sud-

denly spoke. "Put your gun away, Grady. I'll handle this."

There was cold menace in the gambler's voice. Rivers didn't holster his gun, but he lowered it, waiting.

Behind the Sheriff, all eyes in the saloon were centered on Rivers. He felt the hostile gazes like searing knives of flame. He could see Judge Reeves standing, mouth open incredulously, too stunned to wipe that sweat that beaded his forehead.

Callows stepped around Rivers and helped Talbot to his feet. The Sheriff was rubbing his jaw painfully and his eyes were wet with rage. "I ain't gonna let that hombre get away with this, Britt! I—"

"Shut up!" Callows said. "I'll handle this!" He turned to Rivers.

"You're a pretty hard man to convince, Grady. This is the second time you've butted in when it was none of your business!"

Rivers looked at him unflinchingly. "I don't like to see big brave men get in trouble," he said quietly. "The Sheriff might of got hurt."

Callows didn't miss the sarcasm in Rivers' voice. He turned to the Mexican.

"What the hell were you doing listening at my office door?"

JUAN CORANDO was on his feet now. He was breathing heavily and still had his hands at his throat. "I was not leestening, *senor,*" he gasped out. "I do no thing but find the *dinero* I drop." He dropped his left hand from his throat and opened it, revealing a silver dollar in his palm. "The *dinero,* she roll by the door, that ees all I do, *senor!*"

Talbot grabbed Callows' arm. "The damned greaser's lyin' Britt! I saw him myself—the Judge did too!"

Callows glanced over at Judge Reeves. The pudgy man in the parson's coat had his handkerchief out now and was busily using it. He shrugged noncommitantly and lowered his eyes. Callows turned angrily to the Mexican.

"Take your damned guitar and beat it! And next time stay away from my office!"

Rivers holstered his gun as the little Mexican picked up his guitar and sidled apprehensively toward the door. After he was gone Callows hooked his fingers in his belt and said to Rivers: "Now that you're working for me, Grady, you'll let me do the deciding about who's to blame. Savvy?"

Rivers nodded slowly. "Sorry if I hurt you, Sheriff. I'll be more careful next time."

The Sheriff glowered at him, uncertain how to take Rivers' words. Instead he turned to Callows.

"Did you say Grady was workin' for you?"

Callows nodded, motioning to the Judge. "Take Grady over to the hotel and get him a room," he said. "Then come back here. There's some things I want to talk over with you."

Rivers didn't miss the look of fear in the Judge's eyes. Nodding briefly to Callows, Rivers followed the Judge through the batwings.

Night had settled down over *Cinco Robles.* The town was dark and silent, the shop windows dark and staring like empty graves. Rivers walked silently beside Judge Reeves along the board walk planking. He heard the Judge muttering.

"So you signed up with Callows."

Rivers glanced sideways but couldn't see the other man's features in the dark. "Reckon I did. Why not?"

The Judge sighed. "None of my business, Grady. Guess you'll have to learn yourself."

Rivers' interest deepened. "You're

thinking maybe I'll get cowhung like you and the Sheriff?"

His words took effect as Rivers heard the Judge draw his breath in sharply. "I ain't exactly been a model citizen in my time, Grady. This is a big country. If I was in your shoes I'd see some of it."

Rivers frowned in the dark. "I take it you don't like your boss?"

Reeves sighed. "What I like don't matter now. Too late."

"So that's why you stepped in between Kittredge and Callows," Rivers said.

"Just forget what I said," the Judge answered apprehensively. "It'll be healthier for the both of us. Here's the hotel."

Rivers lapsed into thoughtful silence as they came abreast of a squat two story frame building with pale yellow light seeping out through dirty windows onto the silent street. Faded lettering on one of the windows read: *Cinco Robles Hotel.*

Rivers followed the Judge through the door.

THE room was silent. Blade Rivers lay upon a sodden mass of springs and matted wool that passed for a bed. He lay there in the dark, as he had laid for hours, smoking and thinking. Only the faint glowing end of his cigarette showed in the darkness. Only his own breath, blowing smoke into the already heavy air of the room, made sound.

Thinking didn't help much. He had come back to Cinco Robles to clear his name, to find the man who had framed him. He had found him, he was sure. And now he found himself in that man's employ. He had hired his gun out to kill people who years back had been his friends. Burt Stevens . . . John Kittredge . . . Betty Kittredge . . . Yes, Betty. He couldn't get over the fact that she had grown up, was a beautiful young woman. He couldn't forget how she looked, sitting in her saddle, a six-gun held in her small white hand, her eyes cold and blue and furious. She had looked at him strangely, as if . . .

The clink of a pebble against his shaded window brought Blade Rivers upright on the bed. His hand automatically went to the holster at his side before he realized that his gun belt lay on a chair beside the bed. The springs creaked dismally as he swung onto the floor. He fastened the gun belt in a swift movement and then raised the shade from the window and pulled it up carefully.

Bright moonlight flooded a silver path through the room as Rivers gazed down on the street some twenty feet down. In the shadows adjoining the building next to the hotel he made out the figure of a man.

"*Senor* Blade, eet ees I—Juan!"

Rivers sucked in his breath sibilantly. He glanced quickly up and down the silent street. There was no one in sight. Only the Moon, staring down overhead unseeing.

He turned away from the window and reached for his hat. Pulling it down firmly he returned to the window and cautiously let himself over the edge. Keeping his boots away from the frame building he lowered himself the full length of his six feet and then dropped to the ground.

He landed with a dull thud, on his feet. For a moment he stood crouched, listening, waiting, but there was no other sound. Then he moved around the edge of the hotel and into the shadows.

A WIRY, trembling figure grasped him in the dark. Impulsively Rivers folded his own arms about that

small figure. A little aged Mexican, a greaser, but he meant more to Rivers than any man alive. They could call him what they would. "Juan!" Rivers choked the word out.

Juan Corando stepped back in the shadows away from Rivers, and the tall Texan could see him wiping his eyes.

"I knew eet was you, *senor* Blade! I wait these many years, I hope, I pray to the *Madre,* that you come back."

Rivers smiled in the shadows. "My beard didn't fool you, Juan? I haven't changed in ten years?"

The Mexican shook his head. "You have changed, *senor* Blade. But could I forget one who I raised as my own *hijo?"*

Rivers suddenly became apprehensive. "But why did you come here tonight, Juan? With Talbot and Callows feeling about you the way they do . . . "

Juan shrugged. "I not worry about them as I worry about you. They hold beeg meeting even now in Callows' office. We leave town, now, go to *Mejico . . .*"

Rivers' pulse quickened. "You say there's a meeting in Callows' office? Now?"

Juan nodded. *"Si!* I see them in window—Callows, the Shereef, and Reeves—that ees why I come for you now! We *vamos?"*

Rivers shook his head. "I'm sorry, Juan, I didn't come back for that. I'm going to Callows' office."

Juan grabbed Rivers' arm. "But *senor* Blade! Eef they find out—tonight I leesten at door—I hear you join Callows! I do not drop the *dinero* like I say—I wait many years for you to come back . . ."

Rivers bit his lips grimly. "That's right, Juan, I came back. I signed up with Callows. Now I'm going to find out what's going on in his office. Are you with me?"

The Mexican let out a long sigh. Rivers couldn't tell whether it was defeat or gratitude. But Juan grabbed his arm. "The window ees open, but we must be careful!"

Rivers reached out in the darkness and grabbed Juan's leathery hand.

SHADOWS merging with darker shadows, the two men slanted down the silent street. Juan, walking ahead, paused beside a narrow alley-way between the saloon and the adjoining building. A thin sliver of yellow light showed from a window in the space between the two buildings.

Rivers stopped Juan at the entrance to the alley-way. "Keep an eye on the street," he whispered.

The Mexican nodded in the darkness and Rivers slipped his way cautiously along the side of the *Rio Grande* saloon.

As he neared the window, open a scant six inches, he heard the hum of voices. It was Britt Callows talking.

"Kittredge has his cattle spread out on the lower neck of the valley. Here, you can see it on the map."

Rivers slipped his hat off and cautiously raised his head at the edge of the window. What he saw in Britt Callows' office didn't surprise him. He made out Callows, the Sheriff, Judge Reeves, and three other men, obviously gunmen of Callows.

Callows had his back to the window and the other men were leaning across the desk, eyes down on a sheet of paper where Callows was tracing his fingers. Rivers ducked down again as Callows continued.

"This narrow strip between the hills at Cat Gulch is my property. It separates the two sections of the valley—and Kittredge's land. The cattle have to move across my land to get to the

other side."

Rivers heard the Sheriff scoff. "What the hell, Britt, we all know that, and besides, Kittredge can cross your land any time he pleases under the government water rights!"

Rivers heard Callows laugh harshly. "You're right, Sheriff—he can . . . if I let him!"

Rivers put his back against the adjoining building, and making sure he was in dark shadow, lifted his head again and looked into the room. The Sheriff was rubbing his whiskey-red nose thoughtfully.

"How the hell you gonna stop him?"

Callows sat back in his leather chair. "That's why I'm smarter than you, Sheriff," he said sarcastically. "Because I *know* how to stop him!"

The Sheriff's face turned red, and beside him, Judge Reeves had his handkerchief out. Rivers could see a haunting fear in the Judge's eyes. As if he wanted to say something but was afraid to.

Callows drew the cigar box to him and selected a long black cheroot. He lit up and blew smoke toward the ceiling light. When he spoke, his voice held a note of triumph.

"Suppose just at the time I wanted those cattle somebody set off a dynamite charge in the gulch and caused a landslide . . . what would happen?"

Talbot's jaw slacked open as he stared at Callows. "The cattle would stampede . . ."

Callows nodded. "Exactly. And the only way they could go would be through the lower end of the valley—right across the border!"

JUDGE REEVES lifted a shaky hand. "But what about Kittredge and his men? They'd come gunning!"

Callows sneered. "Yellow as usual, eh, Judge? Well, don't worry, with the gulch closed by a landslide, Kittredge won't be able to get through! By the time his men take the long trail through the hills we'll have the cattle delivered to our Mexican friends, get paid off, and have plenty of time to vamoose! Well?"

Judge Reeves shook his head. "That won't stop Kittredge from gunning for us . . ."

Callow's slammed the desk with his hand. "You fool! Don't you realize that once we get Kittredge's herd he'll be broke? I've waited a long time to get rid of him, and this plan is foolproof. There's money enough in that herd to make us all rich! If Kittredge tries anything we'll be ready for him—and don't forget, the law is on our side . . ."

Judge Reeves busied himself with his handkerchief. Beside him, the Sheriff was frowning. "I gotta hand it to yuh, Britt . . . But what about this Grady hombre—where does he fit in?"

Callows smiled. "Grady fits in right nice. I'll tell you about him later. I got plans for Grady."

Talbot's face was perplexed as Callows got to his feet. The gambler turned to the other three men in the room. " You boys know the setup now. Get back out to my spread and have the men ready. Joe, you and Ben will take care of the dynamite. It's stored in the shanty at the gulch, right where we want it. Have everything ready by nightfall. The Sheriff and I'll meet you then."

Judge Reeves had a look of relief on his face "You mean I won't have to go along?"

Callows looked at him and flicked ash from his cigar. "No, Judge, we won't need you. . . . You'll do better keepin' yourself in town."

Rivers ducked down again beside the building as Callows reached up and blew out the ceiling lamp. He heard the

continued mutter of their voices as they left the office. Then the door banged shut and he heard the sharp click of a lock. Then silence.

Rivers hurried along the side of the building. At the corner, Juan Corsando was waiting, half hidden along the edge of the boardwalk.

"Juan!" Rivers whispered. "Quick, back here!"

The little Mexican darted into the blackness between the two buildings. Rivers grabbed his arm and pulled him further down the alley-way.

"What is wrong, *senor* Blade . . ."

Rivers grabbed his arm warningly. "They're leaving—quiet!"

MOMENTS later they heard the dull clunk of boots on board planking, and in the moonlight at the edge of the building, three men walked slowly by. At the same time the muffled beat of horses broke the stillness. Rivers knew that would be the rest of Callows' men riding out of town.

The figures passed the alley-way and were gone. Gradually the sounds faded, until there was nothing but silence again. Juan hissed in the darkness.

"You heard, *senor* Blade? What they say?"

"They said plenty, Juan," Rivers said lowly. "But right now there's something else I want to find out. You wait here, I'm going into Callows' office."

Rivers could hear the little Mexican draw his breath in sharply. Leaning his tall frame against the building, Rivers slipped his fingers under the edge of the window and shoved. There was a grating noise as the window slid upwards. Then silence again.

"I watch, *senor* Blade!" Rivers heard Juan whisper at his back. Then Rivers had hitched himself up over the sill.

His feet dropped noiselessly on the rug. For a moment he stood in the darkness, unmoving. Then slowly he felt his way to the desk. His fingers found the drawer on the left hand side. They slid open smoothly. In the darkness Rivers felt around among sheafs of paper. Nothing but paper.

He started on the right hand side. The first two drawers were equally blank to what he was searching. Then in the last drawer his hand closed over something cold. Drawing his breath in sharply, Rivers straightened. He ran his fingers along the object until he met a small, round, empty depression in it. A sigh left his lips.

Outside the window he heard Juan's agitated voice. "*Senor* Blade, someone comes!"

Rivers let out a curse and swiftly replaced the object in the desk drawer and closed it. Then he reached the window in a quick stride and vaulted over the sill. He paused only long enough to pull the window down to the height it had been open. Juan grabbed him in the dark.

"Do you hear, *senor* Blade?"

Rivers tensed. Yes, he heard it. The approaching beat of a horse. Edging in front of Juan, Rivers hurried to the edge of the building. He sidled out onto the boardwalk, Juan beside him.

HE WAS in time to see a rider coming down the street from the West. Silver moonlight flooded down on a mass of pale, shimmering hair. Small white hands gripped the reins, and in the moonlight were chalky white.

"Betty!" Rivers choked the word out wonderingly.

The girl saw them at the same moment. She pulled her horse in close to the hotel and approached at a muffled trot. Rivers and Juan stood still on the boardwalk.

In a swift movement she dismounted

and came up to them. Her face was blanched, even in the moonlight, and her eyes were dark pools.

"*Blade!* It *is* you, Blade—isn't it!"

Her words took Rivers off guard. Unconsciously he tipped his hat lower over his forehead.

Betty Kittredge ran forward and then Rivers felt her small fingers gripping his arms.

"Blade—I haven't been able to sleep—I kept thinking about you on the knoll—I should have recognized you then, but your beard, and, and—"

Rivers felt a choking sensation in his throat. He stilled her voice with his hand over her lips. Then he had his arm around her and was talking in a voice that sounded strange to him.

"Yes, Betty . . . But why did you ride in here tonight? Callows and his men—"

"I don't care about Callows!" she said tremulously. "Oh, Blade, you've got to leave this town—daddy offered you a job—if Callows or the Sheriff recognizes you! . . ."

Rivers pushed her away gently. Beside him, Juan Corsando whispered. "I try to tell him that, *senorita*—but he weel not leesten!"

Rivers tried to think clearly. It had been a foolhardy thing for the girl to do, riding into *Cinco Robles* like this. Especially since Callows, the Sheriff and Judge Reeves had just left. His heart chilled as he rememberd what he had overheard in Callows office. Good Lord! John Kittredge had to be warned . . .

Rivers turned to Juan. "Juan, you ride back to the Double Y with Betty."

The girl grabbed his arm. "But what about you, Blade? You can't stay here!"

Rivers managed a smile in the pale light. "Don't worry, I'm coming right along. I've got to see your father right away. I'll pick up my horse back of the hotel and follow you. You've got to hurry—if any of Callows' men saw you ride in . . ."

Juan bobbed his head meaningly. "He ees right, *senorita!*"

Rivers could see the girl was undecided. Gently, but firmly he led her back to her horse. He helped her into the saddle and then watched as Juan slid up behind her.

"I'll be right along," he assured them. "Have your father waiting for me."

HE WATCHED them ride off, hoofbeats a muffled patter on the dirt street. Then he turned and strode toward the hotel.

As he drew abreast of the hotel, Rivers became suddenly aware of a glowing spark in the shadows of the door. He stopped abruptly, and his heart stopped with him.

"Evening, Grady. Out for a moonlight stroll?"

It was Britt Callows, standing there in the doorway. Behind him, Rivers made out the squat figure of Sheriff Talbot. There was something in Callows' voice that brought a chill to Rivers' spine. How long had the gambler been standing there—watching and listening?

"You might call it that," Rivers replied, advancing slowly.

Callows flicked ash from his cigar. His other hand was pressed awaredly against his holster. "Who was the visitors?" he asked

Rivers steeled himself. "One of Kittredge's riders. Wanted me to come out to the Double Y," he said.

"That so? This seems to be your lucky night, Grady. You've got a visitor waiting in your room too."

Rivers frowned. "Who?—I don't know anybody in this town."

Callows shrugged. "I wouldn't know. The clerk said somebody went up to your room a while back and is still there, waiting."

Rivers thought swiftly. Could it be Burt Stevens? Had he too recognized him finally? Had he come into town before the girl? If it was Stevens, how would he get back out now that Callows knew he was there?

"Reckon I better find out," Rivers said.

"Reckon so." Callows said drily.

He stepped aside as Rivers passed him. The Sheriff moved back inside the door, and Rivers felt the law man's hostile eyes following him up the stairs.

Outside his room, Rivers paused, listening. He couldn't hear a thing. He glanced back down the stairs, but Callows and Talbot were not in sight. If it was Stevens waiting in there, the two gunmen would be content to wait until he came down.

His hand heavy, Rivers turned the door nob. A pale yellow light edged out into the hall as the door opened. Rivers stepped inside.

He stopped dead on the threshold.

Lying on the floor beside the bed, his eyes glassy, his dirty white shirt front now stained a dirtier sticky red, lay Judge Reeves, a long pearl-handled knife sticking from his chest.

TOO stunned to think, Rivers walked slowly up to the dead man's body.

Almost in the same instant a voice drawled at his back.

"I wouldn't make a move, Rivers. Not a move."

It was Britt Callows' voice. Rivers knew that without turning. He stiffened.

"That's right, Rivers, not a move. Take his gun, Sheriff."

The stunning shock turned into swift anger inside Rivers. He cursed himself for a fool—walking right into the trap!

"I got it." Talbot's voice was jubilant.

"Okay, Rivers, yuh can turn around now."

Rivers turned. Britt Callows was standing in the doorway, a six-gun held steadily pointed at him. The Sheriff had shuffled back beside Callows, holding Rivers' forty-five.

"You don't seem surprised that I know your name," Callows drawled.

Rivers flexed his fingers tensely. "I'm more interested in finding the Judge murdered in my room."

Callows smiled. "It was very convenient, Rivers."

The Texan's eyes narrowed. "Yes, it was very convenient, wasn't it, Callows, getting the Judge out of the way before he got a chance to back down on you!" Rivers remembered vividly the scene in Callows' office just a short time before when Callows said: "No, Judge, we won't need you . . ." He remembered, and he remembered something else. He remembered what Callows had said to the Sheriff about having plans for Grady . . .

"Yes, Rivers, it was convenient," Callows said easily. "Especially since he was found murdered in Blade Rivers' room—Rivers, a man the Judge sentenced ten years ago for murder. And the Judge was killed with a knife too . . . very convenient."

Rivers started forward angrily. "You don't think you can pin this on me? You stinking rat!"

"Hold it!" Callows ground out. "I'd just as soon plug you right here—but we gotta do everything up legal like, don't we?"

"Sure, I wanted to get rid of the Judge. But only me and you and the Sheriff know that. And me and the Sheriff found the Judge dead in your

room! You have a price on your head, Rivers—I knew it was you when you stood up for that greaser, Corsando. I shoulda guessed it when you butted in up at the knoll, but your beard fooled me—and you have changed, Rivers.

"It'll be your word against mine and the Sheriff's. And my word stands in Cinco Robles!"

Rivers fought desperately to keep his voice even. "You framed me once, Callows. You won't get away with it again!"

Callows smiled grimly. "We'll see about that. There's a rope waiting on that cottonwood outside town, Rivers. By tomorrow or the next day it'll be filled—with your body!"

Callows motioned to the Sheriff, and Talbot shuffled forward, a six-gun in his hand. "Jail's the next stop, Rivers—let's see yuh butt yore way outta that!"

EVENING sun slanted golden rays through the bars of the *Cinco Robles* jail. The last rays of daylight were tinged with red. Golden red, a flow of blood from the sky.

Blade Rivers nervously paced the length of his cell, his eyes on the thickening twilight outside. All day he had paced the cell. All day, all year, all his life. It had seemed that way, and now time was growing shorter and longer. Shorter for his life and John Kittredge, and longer, much longer, the time it would take for a rope to strangle his neck. It seemed that way.

The clunk of boots in the hall outside the cell brought Rivers up short behind the bars.

Sheriff Talbot, holding a tray with coffee and a plate of stew, shuffled up to the cell. Behind him a seedy faced jailer was jangling a bunch of keys.

"Thought maybe you might be hungry," Talbot sneered. "This'll be yore last meal, Rivers."

He shifted the tray to one hand, drew his six-gun with the other, and waited for the jailer to open the cell door.

Rivers said nothing. He stood still and watchful as Talbot stepped around the cell door and put the tray down on the edge of the cot next to the cell door. Talbot never took his eyes off Rivers, and his finger was tense on the trigger of his gun.

Hurriedly Talbot shuffled back out of the cell. The door clanged shut and locked.

"Eat hearty, Rivers, the next time I come back for yuh I'll have a rope with me! See yuh tomorrow."

The Sheriff and jailer faded down the short hallway. A door banged shut behind them.

Tomorrow . . . But what about tonight? Rivers paced angrily back and forth across the cell, ignoring the tray of food on the cot. Tonight! He had been a fool not to tell Juan or Betty Kittredge what Callows was planning. Now it was too late. Before the night was over, John Kittredge would be ruined, and in the morning . . .

Rivers sank down on the cot and watched darkness settle through the cell window.

IT WAS quiet and dark outside. Rivers, sitting on the edge of his cot, watched the spluttering flame of a tallow candle set on a plain wood table. The pale light sent flickering shadows up the walls of the cell. Down the hall, beyond the closed door, Rivers could hear the jailer moving around.

"Blade!"

Rivers shot violently erect. His head twisted to the open cell window at the rear of the jail. It came again, a soft whisper.

"Blade!"

Rivers' heart leapt at the sound. It was the voice of—

"Betty!" Rivers whispered in amazement. He crossed quickly to the window, peering out.

She had moved her horse up against the side of the building, and her chin just jutted over the stone sill. "My God—Betty, what are you doing here?"

Flickering candle light briefly showed her features in the darkness outside. Her face was white and grim. "I—I had to come, Blade! Daddy and Burt found out what Callows did to you, and the boys are going to raid Cinco Robles tonight and set you free!"

A cold despair closed over Rivers. He grabbed the bars and pushed his face closer.

"You've got to stop them!" he whispered. "Callows and his men are blowing up the gulch tonight! Do you know what that will mean?"

He could hear the girl's quick stiffled cry. "My God, Blade! Are you sure? —Our herd is in the lower end of the valley! . . ."

Rivers swore. "I know it too damned well! Callows plans to stampede them over the border and sell them—you've got to warn your father!"

"But what about you, Blade? Callows will hang you—"

Rivers turned his head quickly, listening. There was only silence from the front of the jail. "Betty—have you got a gun with you?"

There was a rustle of metal on leather, and the girl shoved a six-gun, butt first through the bars. "Blade, what are you going to do?"

He gripped her small fingers tightly, taking the gun. "Get out of town pronto! Stop your father from riding in—tell him to ride to the gulch! There still may be time . . ."

"All right, Blade—but be careful . . ."

Impulsively she leaned closer against the side of the jail and her face moved between the bars. Warm, trembling lips lightly brushed his, and then she was gone, muffled hoofbeats floating away into the night.

Rivers turned back into the cell, his pulse beating rapidly. He hefted the small six-gun in his hand, and then suddenly stiffened.

THE door at the end of the hall opened and light from a smoky lamp in the Sheriff's office flooded down the corridor. Rivers swung the gun behind his back as the jailer, keys jangling in his hand, walked up to the cell. His seedy features were suspicious.

"Thought I heard talkin' back here—and hoofbeats."

Rivers waited until the jailer's face was only a foot away from the cell. Then he whipped his gun hand forward.

"Don't try to draw!" he warned. "Get busy with those keys!"

The jailer's mouth went slack with astonishment. Then sudden fear crossed his face.

"You—you wouldn't shoot me . . ."

"I said open that door! Pronto!"

With trembling fingers the jailer sidled forward and fitted a key into the cell door. Rivers kicked it open with his foot. He stepped outside quickly and for a moment his body was turned sideways to the jailer.

Rivers saw the man reaching for his gun out of the corner of his eye. He spun quickly, lashing out with his gun hand. The metal barrel connected with the side of the jailer's head. There was a dull thud, then a louder thud as the man fell groaning to the floor. His half drawn gun clattered on the floor beside him, and he lay still.

Breathing heavily, Rivers strode quickly into the office, alert, ready. There was nobody there. He knew why. Long before the Sheriff had ridden from town with Britt Callows. There was so little time . . .

Rivers pulled his gun belt from a hook on the wall behind the jailer's desk and strapped it on. It gave him a comfortable feeling of security. Pausing only long enough to hitch his hat firmly on his forehead, Rivers slid through the door and out into the night.

In back of the jail he found his horse, still saddled, in a leanto stable. Seconds later he rowelled his horse into the night wind, out away from *Cinco Robles*.

THE Moon was edging up over the hills when Blade Rivers pulled his horse up on the sloping trail that led down into the valley. In the silver light he sould see where the valley made a bottleneck in Cat Gulch. Through the gulch it spread out once again and was lost in a shimmering haze of vastness. But it was in the lower end of the valley that Blade Rivers' eyes were centered. Down there, grazing in unconcerned movements beside a narrow stream that flowed down through the gulch, was the Double Y herd. Rivers sucked in his breath at the size of it. There were thousands of cattle down there, representing enough money to make a man rich for life.

Then he saw something else. He leaned forward in his saddle, his eyes squinting into the pale moon glow. He could see a group of horsemen moving down there, on the opposite side of the stream.

"Callows!" he put all the hate that burned inside him into the word.

Searchingly, his gaze flicked to the opposite side of the valley, beyond the gulch. There was no sign of the Kittredge men. His heart sank. Hadn't Betty been in time to warn them? Were they, even now, riding fruitlessly toward *Cinco Robles?*

Savagely, Rivers spurred his horse forward along the trail. It led slopingly downward, toward the gulch below. Night wind whistled in his ears as he rode along the trampled grass trail. There was still one chance . . .

In deep underbrush at the side of the trail, Rivers pulled in. He swung from the saddle and led his horse forward slowly. Ahead, scarcely a hundred yards away, he could make out the clap board shanty at the base of the gulch. Two men were pale shadows beside it.

Rivers advanced within earshot.

"Shore is a quiet night, Ben." Rivers heard one of the men say.

"Yeh," the other replied. And Rivers smiled grimly, remembering Callows' words in his office: "Joe, you and Ben will take care of the dynamite, it's stored at the shanty . . ." Callows' plans were working out then . . .

"Won't be so quiet very long, Joe. I'd like to see Kittredge's face when that blast goes off blocking the gulch!"

Joe laughed. "Reckon the boys are just about set up on the hill. Wonder why Britt didn't take the rest of this stuff along?"

Rivers heard the dry voice of the man called Ben: "Why the hell should he? We won't have no more need for it after tonight! Yuh shore gotta hand it tuh Callows . . ."

Blade Rivers left his horse and sidled forward swiftly through the darkness. Cautiously he moved along the edge of the shanty. Out in front he could see the backs of the two men. He drew silently.

"Wish to hell we'd get the signal to mosey out," the man called Ben complained. "I don't hanker being 'round this dynamite much longer . . ."

Joe grunted. But it wasn't from what his partner had said. It was from the sharp jab of a gun in his back. In the same instant he felt his own gun snaked from its holster.

Rivers stepped around the front of

the shanty. "Hold it, *amigo!*" He called sharply to the other man. "Drop your gun—pronto!"

THE two men spun around, their mouths slack. They saw Rivers standing there, a forty-five pointing straight at them, and Joe's gun in his other hand.

The gunman called Ben swore. "Who the hell are yuh?"

River smiled, but they couldn't see it. "The name is Rivers. Now drop your gun!"

He could see fear edge into their faces as moonlight sent silver rays on the shanty at his back. Very slowly the other gunman lifted his gun and dropped it.

"That's better, boys, now turn around." Rivers said.

"Yuh'll never get away with this, Rivers!" Ben snarled out. "Callows'll get yuh sure!"

Rivers moved forward and kicked the man's gun into the brush. Then he tossed the other gun after it. "Maybe so," Rivers replied. "But in the meantime we got a little work to do. Where's the rest of the blasting powder?"

Joe pointed sullenly toward the shanty. "In there—why?"

River moved over and kicked the door open with his foot. Moonlight, slanting through the doorway, showed two open cases just inside the door. Sticks of dynamite were laid in neat rows in the boxes, along with coils of fuses and blasting caps. He motioned to one of the men.

"Pick it up—and make damned sure you don't drop it!"

The man called Ben moved forward sullenly. As he approached the box of dynamite, sudden fear made him stiffen. "What yuh expect to do with this, Rivers?"

Rivers flicked his six-gun ominously. "Make it quick—you'll find out when the time comes!"

The outlaw bent over and picked up the box. Rivers made sure the other man was in line with his gun. Outside again he motioned them to get around behind the shanty. As they walked, silent, and tense, two horses snorted in the brush before them.

Rivers motioned to the horses. "All right, mount up—and be mighty careful with that box! And remember I'd just as soon shoot—both of you!"

Then two men walked to their horses. Rivers backed up and mounted his own horse. He watched as Joe helped the other man mount with the box of dynamite. Then Rivers motioned with his forty-five.

"All right, just move along ahead of me down the trail."

One of the men called anxiously over his shoulder. "We can't go that way—we'll be at the lower end of the valley in a couple minutes!"

"That's where we're going!" Rivers snapped.

"But the dynamite! . . ." the man yelped. "The stampede'll be right in our path!"

"Shut up, yuh damn fool!" the other rider snarled.

As if in answer to his words, there was the sharp distant crack of a single pistol shot. It echoed hollowly through the hills and then faded away. Rivers remembered with a chill of foreboding the outlaw Ben's words as he came up on the shanty. "Wish we'd get the signal . . ."

Rivers set his lips grimly.

THE minutes dragged eternally by as Rivers kept the outlaws riding ahead of him. They had reached the lower end of the trail and entered the Southern slope of the valley. Bright moonlight flooded it, and to the rear,

Rivers saw the outer fringe of the Kittredge herd, barely a half mile distant. Beyond that, the valley narrowed until it met in a bottleneck at the gulch.

"Rivers—we gotta get outta here!" The outlaw Joe cried desperately. We'll all be killed!"

Rivers said nothing, but shoved his gun hand forward. They kept going.

Sweat made Rivers' shirt sticky against his body. Not even the cool night wind helped. Any second now . . .

And then it came.

There was a blast that split the night wide open. A streaking flame of light shot skyward from the gulch. Rivers' horse shied in sudden fright. The Texan held the horse sharply in check.

Then there was another sound, a rumbling roar. Looking back toward the gulch, Rivers saw a mountain of stone and dirt cascade down upon the valley bottleneck. It was obscured in a rising pall of smoke. And with it came a sudden tremor that shook the valley floor.

"The stampede!" One of the Callows' men cried in fear. "It's comin' this way—we'll be killed!"

Rivers drew his horse up along side the two men. "This is as far as we go!" he snapped. "Get that dynamite on the ground—pronto!"

Under the threat of Rivers' gun, the outlaw Ben got quickly from his saddle and lowered the box to the ground. He glanced fearfully back up the valley.

"We ain't gonna stay here?—It'll be murder!"

"You'll stay and like it—start capping two of those sticks!"

The outlaw got shakily to his feet and made a dash for his horse. "I ain't staying! Those cattle'll be here any minute!"

Rivers shouted hoarsely but the man was already in his saddle. He could have shot him. He could have gotten both of them as they rode madly away. But he didn't shoot.

Cursing, Rivers slid to the ground and knelt beside the box. He holstered his gun and glanced quickly down the valley. Rising thunder met his ears. The thunder of thousands of panic stricken steers, the mad bellowing, and the trembling shock of shaken earth.

Rivers worked desperately. His fingers felt numb as he attached caps to two of the sticks of dynamite. Then he was tearing off a foot of fuse and putting it in place. Sweat was running in streams down his face as he worked. The thunder became earsplitting.

Beside him, Rivers' horse whinnied. Then the Texan was on his feet and pulling a match from his shirt pocket. He struck it against the box and set the flaring end on the fuse. It caught, sputtered, and started hissing.

RIVERS dove into his saddle and spurred madly. Behind him, the spearhead of the stampede was a scant hundred yards away. Leaning hard on the horse's neck, Rivers urged it forward. He set himself for the blast.

And then it came. It was like a sheet of flame breaking the night into day. The concussion sent his horse skidding sideways and nearly threw him from the saddle. His ears rang with a shriek of pain.

And then it faded away.

Rivers pulled his frightened horse to a pawing halt and twisted in his saddle. What he saw made his heart leap.

In the fading glare of the explosion the stampeding cattle were piling up on the leaders, just short of the explosion. In seconds, the entire herd was veering around, thundering away—in the same direction they had come! He had broken the stampede by causing another one! And Callows' men would be in the rear—trapped!

Rowelling his horse sharply to the right, Rivers streaked toward the hills and the trail leading over the gulch.

HE MET the Kittredge riders coming up over the tip of the South hills. Rivers pulled his horse in sharply. John Kittredge, Winchester slung under his arm, rode in the front. Behind him, Rivers made out Burt Stevens, Juan Corsando—and the girl. The rest of the Double Y riders brought up the rear.

"Rivers!" Kittredge bawled out, reining in his horse. "We couldn't get through the gulch! That swine Callows caused a landslide! But he isn't going to get away with it—I'll follow him to Mexico! My cattle—"

"Your herd is safe," Rivers said, as Stevens, the girl and Juan rode up beside him.

"Safe? What the hell—"

"That second blast, you heard it?"

The big rancher nodded. "I heard it! Callows wasn't taking any chances!"

Rivers shook his head. "I set that blast off." He told them in quick sentences what had happened. When he finished, Kittredge's mouth was open.

"I'll be damned," he said.

Then Burt Stevens grabbed his arm. "What about Callows, Blade?"

Rivers twisted his horse around. "There's a chance we may be able to catch him in the valley—if the cattle didn't beat us to it!"

As a single unit, they shot along the trail, guns ready.

But when they reached the peak of the hill, overlooking the gulch and the valley beyond, Rivers' heart sank.

The cattle had reached the rear end of the bottleneck and wore themselves out trying to climb the steep slopes of the hills. They were moving in agitated circles in the basin below, overflowing into the stream cut off by the landslide. But there wasn't a sign of Callows or his men.

"They got away!" Kittredge shouted angrily.

Beside Rivers, Juan Corsando swore. "*Madre de Dios!* But they must have gone back to *Cinco Robles!*"

Rivers nodded. "And that's where we're heading." He paused, looking at the girl. "Betty, maybe you better go back—"

Her eyes flashed in the moonlight. "I'm going along! Nobody's going to stop me!"

Kittredge flared. "If that sidewinder thinks he's safe holin' up in town he better think again! When I finish with him tonight—"

Rivers cut in, his voice edged with steel. "Callows is my meat, Kittredge. I got a personal score to settle with him. Let's go."

Dust flurried at their backs on the road to *Cinco Robles.*

THE *Rio Grande* Saloon was the only building in town alight. Pale yellow rays flooded from its windows as the Kittredge party with Rivers at its head rode into town. Rivers pulled up within a block of the saloon. Behind him, John Kittredge growled: "Looks like a trap!"

Rivers studied the street keenly. No shadows flickered across the windows of the saloon. Were the lights on simply to lead them into a trap, as Kittredge said?

And then suddenly he saw them. The faint flicker of a gun barrel, the sudden movement of a shadow among darker shadows. Around the sides of the saloon, in the eaves of adjoining buildings, they were waiting. If the Kittredge riders had bore down on that lighted saloon, it would have been a slaughter. Behind Rivers, Kittredge and Burt Stevens swore softly.

"That's them in the shadows outside!" Stevens said.

"Get off your horses, boys," Kittredge ground out. "We'll get 'em from this side of the street!"

Rivers stopped them. "Hold it! Callows has as many men as we have —and they're sitting there waiting for us to make a move! This is going to be handled my way!—Just keep your guns trained and ready."

Without waiting for the protests he knew were coming, Rivers eased from his saddle and started walking down the silent street. Behind him he could hear the frightened cry of Betty Kittredge.

"Blade! Blade—don't do it! Don't do it!"

Then there was silence again, only the measured crunch of his boots along the street. Short of the saloon, Rivers called out: "I'm looking for you, Callows. I got something to say. You don't have to be afraid to come out!"

It was a taunt, Rivers knew. Callows or any of his men could have shot him in his tracks. He was hoping the gambler's vanity would make him show himself.

"What's the matter, Callows, you ain't afraid of a man with empty hands, are you?" He advanced again until he was silhouetted in the yellow glow of the saloon's lights. Then he stopped, conscious of a cold sweat beading his forehead.

There was a sneering laugh from the shadows beside the saloon. Then a man stepped out of them, hand held ready at his holster. Even before he entered the fringe of light from the *Rio Grande's* windows, Rivers knew it was Britt Callows.

"Don't try to draw, Rivers," Callows warned icily. "My boys have you covered. Say your piece, and make it fast!"

RIVERS hunched his shoulders tensely. He was taking a long chance and he knew it.

"What I got to say, Callows, concerns me and you. You can take my word for it that Kittredge and his men won't fire a shot—if you'll agree to settle this with me alone."

Callows sneered. "You're wanted for murder, Rivers. The law is on my side. If you're smart you'll give yourself up now!"

"I'm ready to give myself up, Callows," Rivers said slowly. "If you can beat me."

The gambler stepped back a foot into the shadows. "Beat you? At What?"

"In a card game," Rivers said grimly. "You've always thought you was pretty good at cards, Callows. Well, I'm offering you a chance now to prove it. A hand of poker with my life as the stake if I lose. That ought to be fair—unless you're afraid to play."

There was a moment of silence. Rivers knew that every one of Callows' men had heard the challenge. He was counting on this. That and the fact that Callows was a gambler at heart, knowing every trick in the game.

Callows abruptly stepped forward into the light of the saloon. There was a satisfied smile on his face as he said: "I'll play, Rivers. And after yuh lose we'll end our little game up on the knoll!—Yuh can put your guns away, boys."

The tenseness left Rivers and for a moment he felt weak. Callows approached him, and from behind the gambler, men sidled out onto the street. At Rivers' back, he heard the Kittredge party riding up.

Callows turned to Kittredge.

"You heard what Rivers said, Kittredge. I'm holdin' him at it."

The big rancher scowled angrily. Be-

side him, Betty Kittredge jumped to the ground and ran over to Rivers.

"Blade! You can't do it—Callows has nothing to lose—and you . . ."

Rivers smiled slightly. "I'm taking that chance," he said, then turned to the gambler. "Let's go inside."

Rivers followed Callows through the batwings. Inside, he watched as the rest of Callows' men strode silently in, their eyes watchful, tense. Among them he saw Sheriff Talbot, his whiskey-red nose quivering. Then John Kittredge came in. Beside him came Burt Stevens, the girl, Juan, and the other Double Y riders.

Juan came up to Rivers. *"Senor* Blade, I theenk you make beeg mistake! *Madre,* but I—"

"It's all right, Juan. I got a score to settle with Callows."

THE gambler had already seated himself at a table. He motioned to a chair across from him. "Let's get it over with, Rivers."

Rivers walked over and sat down. "We'll have a new deck, Callows."

The gambler's hawkish features were set into a grim smile. "Anything you say. Sheriff—get a new deck behind the bar."

While Talbot was getting the deck, Rivers glanced quickly around him. The Double Y men were grouped at his back. He could see John Kittredge and Burt Stevens nervously frowning. Beside them the girl stood rigidly, her face white and drawn.

On the other side, Callows' men stood at his back. They were confident, their eyes cold.

The Sheriff dumped a new deck on the table and stepped quickly back. Rivers said: "Go ahead, break it open, Callows."

The gambler's fingers moved with swift assurance. He broke the deck and shuffled. Then he laid it in the center of the table.

"Cut for deal?"

Rivers nodded. He reached out and spit the deck. He turned up a king.

Callows smiled, reaching out. He turned up the Ace of spades.

"Looks like I deal, Rivers."

The Texan nodded, watching as the gambler shuffled the deck.

"If I lose, I'll surrender to the sheriff," Rivers said. "If I win I'm asking for your wallet."

Callows' eyes flicked warily up to Rivers. For a moment there was uncertainty in them, then, as his fingers shuffled the deck smoothly, he nodded. *"If* you win, you can have my wallet . . . I'm dealin' draw."

There wasn't a sound in the room as the cards flicked back and forth across the table. Every eye was centered on the dealer, and Rivers felt a mounting tension as he watched those fingers passing cards in blurring swiftness.

Rivers picked up his hand.

He held it close, looking at the three jacks, an ace, and deuce that Callows had dealt him. Then he glanced across the table.

Callows had picked up his hand, flicked his eyes across it, and laid it down on the table. "Need any cards, Rivers?" There was a mocking edge to his voice.

Rivers nodded. "I'll have one," he said, pushing the deuce face down on the table.

Callows reached for the deck, saying: "Too bad, I've got a pat hand."

Rivers reached out and stopped the gambler's hand. "I'm cutting the deck."

Callows stiffened angrily, then drew his hand away. "Go ahead— but *just* cut it!"

RIVERS closed his fingers over the deck. The edges of the cards

brushed his fingers in a swift movement, then he cut.

Callows picked up the deck, his eyes narrowed. Slowly he slipped the top card across the table. Rivers put it over his hand, face down.

"That's all there is, Rivers, turn up. I got a heart flush."

He said is with the assurance of a man who knew all along he was going to have it. He said it and turned his cards up. They were all hearts.

Rivers turned up his own hand, showing the last card. "Too bad, Callows, I drew the ace of spades to my full house. You lose."

There was a startled expression on Callows' face as he stared at the cards. Behind Rivers, the Texan heard a mutter of relief from the Kittredge men.

"I'll have that wallet now, Callows."

Callows was no longer smiling. Slowly he drew his wallet and laid it on the table. The diamond in the center of it glittered ominously. Rivers pulled it over to him.

"One more hand, Callows, my same stakes. If you lose, I get the desk in your office."

There was sweat beading Britt Callows' forehead now. And there was a puzzled frown on his face. He licked his lips nervously.

"One more hand, Rivers."

Rivers picked up the cards, put them together, and shuffled. His fingers worked with the same swiftness that had made Callows' deal a blurring motion. Then he dealt.

Slowly the gambler picked up his hand, studying it.

"Want any cards, Callows?" Rivers asked.

Callows fingered his cards for a moment, then nodded. "I'll take two—and I'll cut!"

Rivers smiled, shoving the deck toward Callows. The gambler fingered it briefly, then cut.

Rivers took the deck and dealt off the top two. Then he picked up his own hand, discarded two cards and swiftly drew two from the deck.

Across from him, Britt Callows had a wide smile on his face.

"I got yuh this time, Rivers—four kings!"

He spread the cards fanwise on the table and leaned back, confidently waiting.

Rivers picked up his hand and dropped it on the table. "I was lucky drawing too, Callows. Four Aces."

The gambler stiffened in his chair, consternation in his eyes.

"I'll have that desk now, Callows." He called over his shoulder. "Burt, take a couple boys and carry it out of here."

Very deliberately Rivers let his hand fall to his holster. He kept his eyes on Callows.

AROUND the room there was a tense shuffling of feet as Stevens and three of the Kittredge riders strode for Callows' office. Callows' men were only waiting for a signal to draw.

"I wouldn't try anything, Callows," Rivers drawled. "You lost, and I'm collecting."

Callows relaxed in his chair, a furtive smile edging into his eyes. He watched as the desk was carried into the saloon and put on the floor beside the card table.

Rivers reached down and pulled out the bottom right hand drawer. He took a long, pearl handled knife from it and laid it on the table in front of him. In the center of the hilt there was a hollowed out depression.

Behind Rivers, Betty Kittredge cried out: "Blade! That knife—it looks like—"

Rivers silenced her. "It's an inter-

esting knife, isn't it, Callows? It gets a lot more interesting when you cut out the diamond in this wallet and fit it where it was taken from . . ."

With swift strokes, Rivers pried the diamond from its embossed leather mounting. He held it for a moment in his hand and then slipped it into the hole in the knife hilt. It fitted perfectly.

There was a mutter from the others watching. But Rivers had eyes only for Britt Callows. The gambler's face was tense.

"Let's go back ten years, Callows," Rivers said, laying the knife on the table. "Let's go back to a killing I was framed for. A killing where one of my knives was used. I had two of them, both diamond studded. The other knife was never found. But one *was* found in the dead man's back. It was my knife, wasn't it, Callows? But what happened to the other one?

"I'll tell you what happened to it, Callows. The man who stole those blades from me when I was drunk that night, the man who framed me for murder by using one of them, that man had the other knife, didn't he, Callows?

"And last night the Judge was murdered in my room at the hotel—with this knife! But I couldn't have had it, could I, when you carried the diamond around in your wallet! It's like I said, the man who had my other knife is the man that framed me for murder—twice!

"I'm going to settle that debt now, Callows."

Rivers started to get up. Around him, not a sound stirred. Then in a swift motion, Britt Callows was on his feet, a six-gun in his hand.

"Hold it! Don't nobody make a move!"

RIVERS stiffened, his hands on the edge of the table.

Callows' voice was a snarl of hate. "A lot of good it's going to do yuh, Rivers! You've got it figured out almost perfect—only you're wrong about who's going to cash in—I'm killing you right now!"

Callows' finger whitened on the gun trigger.

There wasn't time to draw, Rivers knew. Instinctively he threw his body sideways as his fingers closed over the knife hilt.

There was a blast of flame and shouts from the others. A hot lance of flame tore through Rivers' left side as his arm shot back. Then the knife streaked from his fingers.

A loud shriek split the room. Rivers rolled on the floor and to his knees, fighting back the pain that was numbing him as he clawed for his gun.

It wasn't necessary. Britt Callows was staggering on his feet, his hands clawing at his throat. Sticking out of it was a long pearl handled knife, and welling through Callows' fingers was a stream of red.

For a long moment the gambler swayed on his feet, then he fell.

He fell in abrupt silence, fell on the floor and lay still, his eyes glassy, blood spreading on the floor around him.

Rivers got dizzily to his feet. He became aware of sudden shouts, blasts from six-guns, and then silence again. Then somebody was grabbing him.

"Blade! Blade—you've been hit!"

Rivers' eyes cleared. Betty Kittredge had her arms around him, her face close to his, fear widening her eyes.

"I—I'm all right . . . Callows' men, they—"

The booming voice of John Kittredge answered him. "They won't give us any more trouble! Where'd he get yuh?"

Rivers pushed the girl gently away from him. His eyes took in the room at a single glance. There were two other

men on the floor beside Callows. One of them was the Sheriff, his mouth open with shocked surprise, even in death. The rest of Callows' men were lined against the bar, their hands held high.

Rivers felt his left side gingerly. "Just creased me," he said painfully. "I see yuh got the Sheriff."

Kittredge hefted his six-gun. "Saves us a hanging."

Suddenly Burt Stevens was beside Rivers, grabbing his hand warmly. "I haven't had a chance yet to thank you, Blade, for what you did here—especially for me yesterday. I should of recognized you sooner."

Rivers smiled. "It's a lucky thing you didn't."

Kittredge moved beside him. "There's no use me sayin' I owe my ranch to what you did in the valley tonight, Blade—anything I've got is yours . . ."

Rivers looked over at the girl. Then she was in his arms again. The big man turned away, smiling, as Juan Corsando came up.

"I theenk maybe *Cinco Robles* needs a new Sheriff, eh? I theenk maybe *Senor* Blade like that. *Dios*, but I wait long time for thees!"

Blade Rivers was thinking the same thing. His eyes twinkled at Juan, and then his arms closed around the girl. He didn't feel pain any longer.

THE END

★ FORTY SAINTS GO WEST ★

IN 1849 in the city of Boston a group of forty men assembled for the purpose of organizing a party to emigrate to California. Among them were tradesmen, clerks, manufacturers, mechanics, farmers, and laborers. They were innocent of the ways of the West and did not have the faintest idea of what lay in store for them. They were cognizant of only one fact; the journey was to be a hazardous one. From a community where person and property were protected by law and the carrying of weapons was unknown, they were moving into a land where only one law was recognized—the law of the most able trigger finger.

In the winter of 1849 the party left Boston. As far as possible they intended to take advantage of all the luxuries civilization had to offer in the way of travel comfort. By railroad and canal they reached Pittsburgh. There a steamboat was rented by the group for the journey down to Kansas City. The trip was uneventful, and all went smoothly—that is, until their boat docked at St. Louis.

Their purpose in stopping there was to gather supplies and to receive new passengers who were to join their party. These strangers were also heading West in search of yellow wealth and were destined to become a part of the closely-knit group—for a very short period of time. The sedate, but innocent, group from Boston was indoctrinated with varied knowledge and experience of a new and invaluable type. Every day of the trip furnished them with lessons, and at the end of the journey every member was a graduate; he had experienced more arts, devices, shifts, and deeds of daring, honor, dishonor, rascality, and deviltry than all the educational institutions of the land could have shown.

One of the most unforgettable object lessons the steamer trip provided began just as they were about to depart from St. Louis. Four men staggered aboard, somewhat the worse for the amount of liquor they had consumed. One of these men was a native of Illinois on his way to California, and the other three were residents of St. Louis. The man from Illinois was said to have $1500 which he carefully deposited with the clerk of the boat. Almost before the steamboat was under way these four newcomers seated themselves around a table, and there they stayed. Early and late they could be found there, a pile of money between them and their eyebrows knit in concentration. Invariably the money fell into the hands of the three men from St. Louis.

The Bostonians regarded these men as curiosities worth much time and study. Some of them became close observers of the game; Dr. Robinson was especially interested. He had read of the gambling and the desperate men in the South and West, and, too, of the shady characters to be met on river steamers. The game became a continuous show in the wiles and cuning of sharpened western wits.

As the playing progressed more and more drinks were ordered. The man from Illinois was kept in an unusually cheerful state of mind, considering the amount of money he was losing. On the other hand, the St. Louis men were cool and sober. During the second evening the air about the small table seemed to emanate a tenseness; many more bottles were tipped, and the amount of liquor consumed achieved a new high record. In a desperate moment, the man from Illinois left the table and went to the bar with the others where he was coaxed into accepting another drink. Dr.

Robinson was called away to attend to some urgent business in the pilot's cabin. He did not have the opportunity to witness these proceedings. However, he understood what had occurred when he was called upon to aid the poor and broken man from Illinois.

This victim of the "card sharks" was found in his cabin mortally ill from a drug which had been slipped into his last drink. His suffering was unbearable; the doctor tried to alleviate his pain. Spasms and conclusions set in, and before many hours had passed the poor man died.

As soon as a settlement was reached the boat docked, and the body was taken ashore. Doctor Robinson wanted to hold the men for prosecution but learned that it was virtually impossible to see justice done this far west. The best advice he could obtain on the subject convinced him that his desire was a wild one and that there was no law which could or would reach the case. Furthermore, he was assured that if the men from St. Louis even suspected what was in the Doctor's mind, they would put him where he could not be summoned as a witness. And, despite all this, should the complaint reach the proper authorities, Dr. Robinson would be retained as a witness for the trial which might be delayed for a year. His trip West would then have to be postponed.

Dr. Robinson's hands were literally tied in this case. There was nothing for him to do. The men were allowed to go their own way. After fully considering the situation, Dr. Robinson and the other thirty-nine men from Boston came to the very wise conclusion that it would be impossible for them to remedy all the evils of the world!

At Kansas City the next step of the journey brought its own problems. The steamboat was abandoned and preparations were made for the great trek across the western prairies. More supplies were purchased and oxen teams were assembled.

Unfortunately, the oxen were unbroken to the yoke and the men were inexperienced in the handling of these animals. A crowd of seasoned Westerners gathered to watch the forty "green" Easterners try to get started. Their clumsy attempts at hitching up, starting, and driving the oxen evoked hearty laughter and jibes from the crowd. The oxen paid no attention to the calls of whoa, haw, or gee, and the start of the party was delayed for a day. Finally they found that the only way their transportation problem could be solved was by having men of their own group walk on both sides of the teams to guide them. This did not end their troubles, however, for at every sharp turn and at the crossing of creeks and ravines the animals displayed unusual fits of temperament. Sometimes a revolt on their part would last half a day. The forty men from Boston were learning about the West.

As a special precaution the teams were unhitched from the wagons at night but not unyoked. This was done so that as much time as possible could be saved—for among them they knew that to unyoke and yoke these teams on the open prairie would require at least twenty out of twenty-four hours; that would leave them but four hours in which to eat and sleep and no time in which to travel. The unyoking of the oxen was not given a second thought; the prospect and all it involved was too dangerous.

During the first week of the wagon journey one of the most amusing, and yet serious, incidents occurred. The forty stalwart pioneers were confronted with a problem. It was settled peacefully among them, but for a time when words flew fast fists might have been brought into action also if it had not been for their strong Puritanical training.

It happened on the first Saturday of the Journey. The wagons had not covered as much ground as the men had hoped, and when nightfall came a water source had not been reached. Nevertheless the caravan had to rest, and so camp was pitched on the high prairie. The next morning two men were sent out ahead to scout around and find the nearest stream of water. Their hunt was successful; Wakarusa Creek lay only three miles away. It was necessary to move on those extra three miles even though it was Sunday but the Bostoners wanted to make that day a day of rest. Water was needed so badly, however that even the strictest Puritan in the party agreed to move on. After reaching the creek and watering the stock, the question arouse as to whether they should continue traveling as long as they had started. Here the real clash developed.

After a very heated discussion a vote was taken and those who favored traveling that day turned out to be in the majority. But the triumph of the Sunday travelers was brief. When going downhill in a spot not far from where they had stopped, the chain between the cattle became slackened and twisted about a steer's leg. This went unnoticed until level land was reached. When the chain was straightened and made taut by the weight of the wagons, the animal's leg was broken. By those who had opposed traveling for that day, this calamity was interpreted as a judgment of God for breaking the Sabbath. No further progress could be made that day except in theological discussion. Much of the talk dwelt upon the pros and cons of Sunday traveling and the probable reason for the accident. One party appealed to the Decalogue, and another called for its reading. Improvisations on the heretofore generally accepted interpretations led to the further muddling of the case. Before they realized what had happened, their Puritan scruples had vanished and one side offered a dollar for every word in the New Testament which called for the observance of any day as a Sabbath. Not too many months later the sticklers for Sabbath observance were seen betting at the gaming tables in Sacramento, California. Those forty men had learned the wiles of the West.—*Jane Conrad.*

SCATTERGUN RECKONING

By Nat W. McKelvey

Zach Wilson had to supply the army with beef—and he intended to do it, no matter how many Mex tried to stop him

Twice the scattergun roared and two of the Mexicans guarding the stolen herd plunged from their horses, stone dead

ZACH WILSON crouched tensely behind the dense, protecting thicket of blackjack and scrub oak. His double-barreled scattergun, supported by a brawny, sun-tanned arm, pointed squarely at the entrance of the rustlers' dug-out. In his free hand, he held a cocked and ready six-shooter, its heavy snout poking into the dim blue of a dawn sky.

Zach, who contracted beef in the Seventies for a remote army post in the Indian Territory, was playing out the last hand of a four-day game with death. Beneath the frayed leather of his dirty buckskin jacket, his muscles bunched tightly. On the success of this last play Zach's honor and financial standing hung in precarious balance.

Resting inside the trigger guard of his Colt, the leathery old contracter's fore-finger throbbed with anticipation.

"I've got to wait just a bit more," he whispered. "Got to have just a mite more daylight." The rustlers' dug-out held his amber eyes with almost hypnotic power.

Restlessly, Zach watched the rosy dawn, like a stalking tiger, creep slowly over the prairie. Beyond the dug-out, he knew, in the bowl of the plains, a thousand head of prime beef moved; restive, unwatched—among them, one hundred and fifty animals in which Zach had a desperate, personal interest.

"In just a minute," the contractor muttered, "in just a minute now, I'll blast a hole in the blue with this six-gun. And then, by glory, that cattle stealin' varmint's just gotta come out that dug-out door. He's gotta come out! And when he does . . .!" Zach gripped the twin-barreled, buckshot-charged shotgun a little tighter. A grim

smile pulled at his thin lips, and the feathery lines at the corner of his smoldering eyes squeezed together.

ALMOST a month earlier, Zach had been drinking in the officers' bar of a small military post in the Indian Territory. He had little to cheer him. But because the men liked him and expected it, he drank with them, swapped yarns with them and occasionally gambled with them.

Bantering with a couple of junior officers, Zach was leaning on the polished oak bar when Major Piper Sanders, post-commandant, strode crisply into the room.

"Wilson," roared the major, jutting out this bull-neck and squaring bearish shoulders, "I want to talk to you." Speaking with clipped, military precision, he treated language as though it were precious, not to be used but saved.

Wearily, Zach turned from the bar. *The show-down.*

"All right, major. Excuse me, boys."

Stepping away several paces, Zach worriedly scratched a bald spot in the middle of his thatch of graying hair while his eyes held Sander's tight lips.

"Get this, Wilson," the major began. "There's been complaints against your beef. You'll have to do better. If you don't, I'll order the commissary to buy good beef and charge it to you."

The lines in Zach's face rippled, and his hawk nose twitched. Under the surface of his skin, he felt anger twisting. What could the commandant know about a cowman's problems? What did Sanders care for the reputation that accounted Zach Wilson one of the most reliable beef contractors in the Territory? Didn't the fool know there was a drouth on?

"I know my beef is none of the best," Zach gritted. "But give me a little time, and I'll get you the best."

"All right, Wilson," snapped the major. "But do it! You've got thirty days."

Zach didn't wait for the echo of the major's heavy boots to die. Into the bright sunshine of the military compound, he followed closely on the officer's heels. Past the commissary, past the mess-hall, past the barracks and stables, Zach hustled along, his flashing feet raising puffs of fine, adobe dust.

In his quarters, the beef contractor crammed cash into a money-belt, wrapped it around him. At high noon, with blanket roll and full saddle bags, Zach Wilson rode from the fort, the fine head of his buckskin bronc pointed south.

"A month to beat the drouth. A month to stave off ruin. I can do her —with luck."

DOWN in the green grass country of Texas, just east of Ft. Worth, Zach opened his money-belt in exchange for a hundred and fifty head of prime beef. With the herd, he acquired the services of Pepe, twelve-year-old Mexican herd boy.

"He's powerful bright and handy," the cowman told Zach. "And he's got plenty of sand."

Zach turned to the boy. "Can you shoot a double-barrel shotgun?"

"Si, señor." The lad's black eyes glistened. "You want I should keel somewan?"

Zach cackled with delight. "Reckon not. Not just yet, anyways. But there's plenty of Injuns around this country, an' we just might need it." Zach bought the gun for the boy, adding it to his own irons, a breech-loading rifle and brace of Colt revolvers.

Man and boy, driving the herd before them, travelled quietly and with-

out incident into Indian Territory. About fifty miles from the post, jogging along one sparkling morning, Zach turned to Pepe.

"Well, kid," he grinned, "sure looks like we's gonna make it. Three weeks gone all right, but we's so close to the fort now you could mighty nigh spit on it. Makes a man feel powerful good." Hungrily, Zach gulped in the crisp, dry air.

"Ah, si, señor," Pepe agreed. "Ees good. But I theenk somewan she is coming on us weeth horseback. You want I should keel heem?" He laid a small hand on the butt of the shotgun, protruding from a saddle boot.

Zach peered in the distance where Pepe's brown finger pointed.

"Reckon not, you blood-thirsty little weasel. Probably just a friendly puncher." Zach grinned, but his hand slid to the Colt, holstered at his hip.

Watching the approaching stranger, Wilson felt no cause for alarm. The man came alone. Armed, of course, but alone. As the newcomer reigned up before them, man and boy could nor restrain a gasp of astonishment at his superb outfit.

"Hello, amigo," the stranger murmured in soft, almost feminine tones. Leaning forward on his gleaming blue-black mustang, he swept from his head a magnificent gold-braided, Mexican sombrero. His small, swarthy hand held it while his white teeth flashed a warm grin beneath a trim moustache.

"Well, good mornin' to you." Zach spoke only with his mouth. His mind busied itself registering the man's material glitter and physical makeup. Small, Zach saw, and handsome, after the manner of the "breed." His high boots sported large silver spurs, and his saddle and bridle glistened with the precious metal. The mustang bucked and shied, but the stranger rode him like his skin.

"Name's Pete Piquero," he offered. "Maybe I could ride with you a little, no?"

"Reckon so," Zach agreed, "long's you keep them fancy, pearl-handled irons of yours in leather."

"Ah? You do not trust me, amigo?" A smile curled the breed's full, well-shaped lips.

"Maybe yes, maybe no," Zach answered flatly. "I don't know you."

FOR a quarter mile, the strange trio rode along in silence. The breed broke it.

"My friend . . . ahhh . . . maybe you will do me a leetle favor, no?"

"Depends." Zach's tone stiffened.

"It is thees," the breed continued. "I have the large herd of steers about three miles to the east. I am afraid, maybe, your cattle will give to my cattle the fever. Would you be so kind as to go a little to the left, off my range?"

"Well," Zach hesitated, then shrugged. "Guess I can do that." As he listened carefully to directions laid down by Piquero, Zach thought, "Might keep *my* cow critters from catchin' tick fever, too."

Finished talking, the breed reigned away. Waving his gaudy sombrero as he touched spurs to the mustang, he yelled:

"Thanks, amigo. Thanks for everything."

"Right amiable fellow," Zach commented to Pepe.

"Si, señor. But maybe I should have shoot heem."

An hour later, Zach could almost smell the familiar air of the fort. He would be glad to be home, safe, successful. Riding point, with Pepe on the drag, Zach dismissed all thoughts of trouble. Man and boy were pushing the herd over a small crest, Pepe

singing gay Mexican songs and Zach yipping and laughing. Suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, a band of horsemen sprang into their path. Six of them, Zach counted, plus the breed dandy!

Piquero rode up to Wilson. The contractor appraised the obsidian eyes behind the breed's smiling mouth. He watched the man flip a long case knife, balancing it with the obvious skill of an expert.

"After thinking it over, amigo," Piquero lied smoothly, "I have decided it would be a pity to lose such a fine bunch of beef as you have got. So I have decided to take them for myself."

Six revolvers leveled at Zach's head. He held no cards in this game, and he knew it.

"Reckon I been plumb dealt outta this hand," he acknowledged. His amber eyes sparked hotly, but he squelched an impulse to go for his gun. Instead, he tried persuasion.

"Well, Piquero," he drawled, "if this weren't my last lot of beef, I'd say take 'em and be damned. But if I don't get them steers to the post comes a week from tomorrow night, I'm a ruined man. I don't like beggin', but I'm askin' you as a gentleman to let my beef alone."

INSOLENTLY, the breed hissed his answer. "The compliment ees good, amigo." His eyes slitted. "We do not take advantage of the cattleman. But thees cattle that you have are all the same as government property. As you explain, they're going to feed soldiers. Such property is as much belong to me as to anybody. Now you get!" He waved the long knife, while his six punchers thumbed back their Colts.

"Puttin' it that way," Zach gritted glumly, "I ain't got a choice. Come on, Pepe."

"Coming," Pepe answered mournfully. "But maybe, señor, I should have shoot thees fellow in the firs' place."

"Yeah, maybe." For a mile or so, Zach and his small companion walked their horses. In the beef contractor's mind a plan took shape.

"Pepe," he spoke, "I ain't one to take this lyin' abed. You scared to stay with the horses?"

"No, señor. But I like help you keel thees evil ones."

Zach chuckled, but turned the boy off with a head-shake. In a thicket, where even a hound couldn't find them, Zach and the youngster concealed their broncs. Toward dusk, his feet mocassined to leave no trail, Zach slipped out of the scrub oak hideaway, picking his way carefully along the edge of the prairie. Loaded with sixteen over-size buckshot to the barrel, Zach's shotgun rested lightly in the crook of his arm.

As the night blackened, the contractor came upon the herd, grazing in a natural depression. Finding his own cattle, he slipped among them.

Down on his belly in the prairie grass, Zach flattened his sinewy body against the ground. Slowly he eased back the hammers on his scattergun.

"Only two punchers on herd," he thought with satisfaction.

Like a sluggish stream, time trickled by. In the grass, Zach twisted and fumed. Finally, however, singing in a rasping, off-key tenor, one of the punchers started on a trot past Zach's hiding place. Up came the shotgun, Zach's eye squinting along the barrel. As the rider came abreast, Zach pulled the trigger.

"Pretty as a pitcher," he chuckled, watching the puncher lurch to the ground, stone dead.

"What the hell's that!" Fearfully,

the other night rider called into the darkness. Zach could see him coming hellbent to investigate. With a hollow "barroom," the scattergun drained its other barrel.

BACK in camp, Zach told the sleep-drugged Pepe: "Not a bad night, kid. Got two of the dirty buzzards."

But the following night, Zach had no luck. Riding tight herd, the rustlers were keeping their eyes open. But on the third night, from a blackjack ambush, Zach picked off two more of Piquero's men. The fourth day, two miles from the rustlers' dug-out, near a wooded point, Zach bagged his fifth cattle thief. During the afternoon, the sixth fell to the lead and flame-spitting shotgun. Only Piquero remained.

From his ambush in a thicket about twenty yards from the rustlers' dug-out, Zach welcomed the daylight. His finger curled around his Colt's trigger, pressed it. With the roar of the gun, the morning air became lively with echoes. In the split second before the sound died away, Zach wondered:

"Will that yellow skunk, Piquero, come out?"

For answer, he saw the dug-out door burst violently open. With a six-gun in either hand, Piquero swayed there an instant, searching for a target. He didn't have a tenderfoot's chance with a tinhorn. Before he could move, Zach's scattergun spewed out its deadly cargo, doubling the rustler in his tracks.

AT the post, a few nights later, Zach was telling the story.

"Well," he drawled, "only man left was the outfit's cook. He come outta that dug-out with a white flag flappin'. I made him help me round up them steers of mine, and by hard ridin', me and Pepe beat the major's deadline." His eyes sparkled.

"But it sure were a tight fit, boys. Have a drink?"

THE END

★ WILD WESTERNER ★

OUT of the west comes the story of one of its most picturesque characters—Ben Lilly, an old time trapper and hunter of the Rocky Mountains. He demanded little of life, lived simply and happily among the other creatures of nature. He was able to eke out a living tracking down and killing the animals which terrorized and pestered the ranchmen. His passion for hunting bears absorbed his life, and the bounties which he received from killing bears, wildcats, and other animals sometimes would net him as high as a thousand dollars a year.

In Louisiana he had a wife and three children. Once when he went out to shoot the hawk which had been after their chickens he didn't return for two years. His only words of explanation were to the effect that the hawk kept flying. He was known as a crack shot in Louisiana. Some said he could shoot a twig under a squirrel a hundred yards off and then with another shot kill the squirrel as it and the severed twig fell. His fame even spread to the ears of that hunter who became head of a nation, Teddy Roosevelt. The two once hunted together in the Louisiana wilds.

It was in 1900 that Ben set out toward the West in search of bigger and tougher bears. His adventures with nature and her most brutal creatures were stored safely in the back of his mind. And as time wore on and the ravages of his hard outdoor life began to take its toll, the makings of a book began to form out of his fertile imagination. But the lack of formal education made the expression of his thoughts on paper almost impossible. Writers who have viewed the clumsily scrawled words were amazed at the keen intellect which revealed itself. Lilly had a feeling for nature which only a few American writers have been able to express adequately. . . . Emerson and Thoreau, for example.

All efforts made by his many friends to care for Lilly in his declining years met with failure. The manuscript from which he refused to part was accidentally destroyed and as a result was kept forever from the eyes of America's reading public. Ben Lilly at eighty-four was spry and talkative, with clear blue eyes and a reddened leathery complexion. His last days were spent fighting a severe case of pneumonia, fighting it with all the tenacity a western hunter could muster up. But this was the last fight for Ben. The disease wasted him away, and in 1936 he died in New Mexico.—*R. Dee*

EMPTY FENCES

By L. P. Holmes

The rails run straight—or at least that's what the Railroad would like them to do. Sometimes crooked men make it impossible . . .

The wind was an ominous sound in Bill's ears as he pushed his horse forward

THE night wind of the high Nevada Desert was blowing, and on the wings of it, reaching up from the dark gulf of Washoe Valley, come the mournful, fretting complaint of thirsty cattle.

In the ears of Bill Marion, as he pushed his big line backed dun horse along at a steady jog toward the beckoning lights of the Long C headquarters, the sound was ominous, and wordlessly he damned the railroad that had brought such a situation about. The railroad which, when negotiating a right of way through the Washoe Valley range had given its solemn promise that the three big waterholes at Concho Springs, at Devil's Knob and at Three Pines would forever remain open and common property. And which now had broken that promise and fenced off the water, and so loosed dark tides throughout all the valley.

It had been Bill Marion's hope that he would find the three Chancellor boys at home alone, but as he pulled up in front of the Long C ranchhouse he saw, in the shape of three saddle broncs ground reined there, that this hope was an empty one. However, he went grimly ahead with his purpose, which was his way.

His knock was answered by Arlene Chancellor, her fair, auburn head glinting in the golden glow of the lamplight. Looking at her, Marion wondered bleakly if those dark tides that were beginning to run were going to touch this girl and cast a shadow across the bright, gay spirit of her. He drawled gravely, "Evening, Slim. I'd like to see the boys, unless I'm rated a complete maverick around this ranch."

Her answer was crisp, a trifle stiff. "You can see them, of course. But you can hardly expect drums of welcome to be beaten. Come on in."

They were gathered in the big living room. The Chancellor boys, Ward and Cleve and Dave, who was the youngest. Big men, all, with the wild, intolerant streak, the reckless, hell-for-leather inheritance from their father, old Buck Chancellor. Tawny headed men, hawkish of feature, with blazing blue eyes. Full of a high and burning pride and intensely loyal to each other. With them were Tack Pedlar, Boyd Hocken and Rip Roblin.

Ward Chancellor said, some mockery in his tone, "If it isn't that staunch rock of the hills himself, Mister Bill Marion. What is it that brings the virtuous into this nest of iniquity?"

The jibe brought just a hint of added color into Bill Marion's deeply bronzed face. He was a spare, erect figure, with the wind and the sun and the toughness of the desert burned into him. He kept his tone quiet. "I thought you'd be interested in a little development brought about by that little stunt of

dynamiting the railroad's water tower at Concho Springs."

A shift of restlessness ran through the room. Boyd Hocken said thinly, "Who said that water tower was dynamited? And if it was, why insinuate that we had anything to do with it? If you'd come to preach the same old sermon, Marion, I for one don't care to listen."

BILL MARION'S grey eyes went a trifle wintry. Boyd Hocken was a poker faced, intense sort, with his thoughts forever hidden behind a wall of remote inscrutability. A man who could be dangerous. The only time he ever seemed to thaw appreciably was when he was in the company of Arlene Chancellor.

"I'm not preaching, I'm just laying some facts on the line," said Marion. "You know damned well that water tower was dynamited, and you know who did it, the same as I do. You fellows made your brags about that."

"Unless you got proof I wouldn't spread that opinion, Marion, was I you," said Tack Pedlar, in his dusty, whispery way. Leathery and shriveled was Tack Pedlar, penurious, sly and crafty. A cagy sort, eternally alert for any chance to further the welfare of Tack Pedlar.

"The proof is there to anyone who can read ordinary sign. Like Sheriff Jim Freeburg, for instance. When I left his office, Jim was cussing you fellows for putting him on the spot."

"What spot?" demanded Pedlar.

"Jim doesn't want to come after any friend of his with an arrest warrant. Which he would have to do, if the railroad was to swear out the warrants."

"Is that the development you mentioned, Bill?" asked Rip Roblin. Roblin was a noisy, profane sort, but a good man and a pretty sound one. Long headed in his way, enough so to always consider what failure could mean as well as victory. Rip Roblin's greatest virtue was fidelity to his friends. Right or wrong, Rip would go to bat for a friend, all the way.

"Yeah," prompted Cleve Chancellor, "what about this development?"

"The railroad," said Bill Marion slowly, "has sent in a couple of detectives. They showed up when I was talking to Jim Freeburg and introduced themselves."

Cleve laughed harshly, "What do we care for a couple of damned railroad dicks? They go to snooping too much we'll run 'em clear out of the valley."

"I'm afraid," said Marion, "They won't run easy. They had credentials which they showed Freeburg, proving that the authority of the railroad was behind them. They carried other authority. Two guns apiece, tied down. And all the other ear-marks. In my time I may have seen a tougher pair, but I don't know where."

"Tough or not, we'll run them out of the valley," vowed Cleve.

Bill Marion shrugged. "So the railroad would send back a dozen more, if need be. Can't you fellows see that the line of action you're committing yourselves to is only going to make things worse instead of better? Get it through your heads that you're fighting a railroad, not some outfit no stronger than you are."

"The bigger they are the harder they fall," quoted Boyd Hocken. "And don't measure the nerve of others by your own lack of it."

Bill Marion turned, little knots of bunched muscle working up and down his jaw. "Meaning?" he growled ominously.

"Meaning things we been hearing," sneered Hocken. "Such as you having your crew out on a round-up chore.

Now it ain't spring and it ain't fall, the regular shipping seasons. So, your making a gather can mean only one thing. You're going to peddle your herd. You're quitting. The damned railroad has bluffed you out."

"You're sure of that?" Dark anger was running all through Bill Marion, but he was trying to hold it in check.

"I'm plenty sure of it," declared Boyd Hocken flatly. "The mealy mouth talk you been making from the very first of this affair is all the proof I need. You just haven't got what it takes, Marion."

THERE was a limit to any man's forbearance. Abruptly Bill Marion was way past his. In one long stride he was up to Boyd Hocken. He shot out a hand, caught Hocken by his shirt front, jerked him to his feet. Hocken hissed like a startled snake, slashed a hand down toward his gun. With his free hand Bill Marion caught Hocken's wrist, gave it a twist which left it numb and the gun dropped from Hocken's nerveless fingers. Then Marion gave Hocken a throw which sent him staggering clear across the room, to bring up against the far wall with a crash. Marion followed him up, slightly crouched.

"I've had a big plenty of your damned sneers, Hocken," Bill grated. "You've been laying your tongue on me ever since this water trouble cropped up, taking slams at my nerve just because I couldn't see any sense in making an outlaw of myself like the rest of you fools seem determined to do. You can take all of your talk back, right here and now, or I give you a working over to date time from. Take it back! You don't get another chance!"

The pupils of Boyd Hocken's black eyes dilated and red hate blazed in them. He was gathering himself to leap at Marion when Ward Chancellor pushed his big shoulders between them.

"Steady—both of you!" rapped Ward. "Give way, Bill. Boyd, you asked for this. I told you before that Marion has a right to his own opinion and just because it doesn't agree with ours is no sign there is anything wrong with his nerve. Whether or no we see eye to eye on this deal, it makes no sense that we go to fighting among ourselves. So you better take it back, Boyd."

It was gall and wormwood to Hocken. His lips were a white line and he gnawed at them until crimson showed. But he mumbled, "All right, I take it back."

"Good!" Ward Chancellor turned to face Bill Marion. "I reckon the best thing you can do is drift. Much obliged for bringing the word about those two railroad dicks. But in the future we'll be able to watch our own back trail."

Bill Marion picked up his hat and walked to the door. He turned for a final word. "One last little angle," he said wearily. "I tell you those two railroad dicks are tough ones, plenty. And not carrying two guns each just for appearances. You and Cleve and Dave are no more immune to hot lead than anyone else, Ward. I hope you've considered what the effect can be on Slim, if one of you boys stop one."

It was the girl herself who answered him, though her face was a trifle pale. "We Chancellors stick together. I thought that had been made plain a long time ago—to everybody."

Marion looked at her, his eyes shadowed. He shrugged. "I hope nothing ever hurts you, Slim. Good night!"

The door closed behind him and presently they heard the hoofs of the dun horse drumming away into the night. Boyd Hocken made a violent sweeping motion with his hand. "I'm fed

right up to the eyes with mealy mouthed preaching," he said thickly.

Nobody seemed to hear him. Ward Chancellor was looking at his sister, marking the mist of tears in her eyes. He said gently, "We'll be careful, Sis."

The girl turned abruptly and ran from the room.

CHAPTER II

Slow Wrath

RAY TENNY was thirty-five, a keen, shrewd young lawyer. He sat in his office in the town of Maverick and faced Bill Marion across his desk. Half an hour before, Tenny had come in from Caledon on a local passenger train. As he spoke now his voice was troubled.

"I've gone over the ground from A to Z, trying to find a good angle of attack, Bill. We got a fight on our hands. As was to be expected, they got a good legal staff and, while they can't entirely block us from getting our case in front of a court, they are wise to every angle of delay. In fact, that seems to be the line of battle they intend to put up. Delay, postponement, then more delay."

Bill Marion n o d d e d soberly. He looked drawn and bleak. A week's growth of whiskers blackened his face. The grime and dust of long hours in a round-up camp was on him. "Stay with 'em, Ray," he growled. "I'm thinning down my herd by about three hundred head, because with those valley water holes tied up, the grass on the lower ranges can't be used. And while the market is far from its best right now, three hundred head should bring me enough money to keep this court fight going for some time. Need more money, now?"

"Lord, no! That last check you gave me will go for a long time yet. Some other things I found out at Caledon, Bill. George McClintock, who negotiated the right of way through the valley for the railroad, and who made the promise that the water holes would be kept common property, did not break his word. McClintock went to pieces from overwork and is away on a leave of absence for a long rest. This new man, Arnold Devore, who took McClintock's place, is the one who ordered the fencing of the water holes."

"You get a chance to talk to him?"

Teddy nodded. "He's smooth, smooth as oil. Fast on his feet and hard to pin down. Looks you right in the eye and talks as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. But somehow you can't get him in a corner. Big, handsome devil. The kind generally known as a go-getter. Understand he is highly thought of by the directors because he brings in the profits, but also not so highly thought of by the ordinary working stiffs of the road, who say that Devore upped the revenue by taking it out of their hides in extra work. As I saw him, I'd say his fundamental enthusiasm is for Arnold Devore, first, last and all the time."

"That last sounds like a description of Tack Pedlar," growled Marion. "Well, we'll stay with him. When you going back to Caledon?"

"Tomorrow morning on the ten o'clock westbound."

Bill Marion nodded, as he got up and headed for the door. "If I think of anything else, I'll see you before you leave. Now I'm going over and see Jenkins, the station agent and order up some cars for my shipping herd. And then go see Tony Gaspard and get this brush off." He rubbed a hand across his whiskered jaw.

Jenkins, a burly sort in striped bib overalls, seemed startled at Bill

Marion's order for ten cattle cars. "This ain't the cow shipping season," he blurted.

"It is if I want to ship 'em," said Bill. "Get those cars."

Jenkins headed for his telegraph key. "Come back in an hour," he mumbled. "I'll have the date by then."

AT THE barber shop, Bill lay back in the chair with a sigh. "Bring me out of the woods, Tony," he ordered.

While he worked with lather and blade, Tony Gaspard related the latest news about town and it was news that brought such a jerk of surprise out of Marion that Tony backed away, holding his razor high, sputtering indignantly.

"You crazy man, Beel! You want your throat cut—no?"

"Sorry," Bill growled, settling back. "Only you shouldn't throw news like that at a man when you got a razor against his neck. Go on, man—go on! I'll be good."

So Tony went on and while Bill lay quiet in the chair, his eyes narrowed bleakly. According to Tony, Ward Chancellor was lying in one of Doc Porter's hospital rooms with a bullet through his chest. It had been a close squeak. Only in the last twenty-four hours had Doc Porter been willing to say that Ward was out of danger.

Max Drury, one of the railroad dicks had done the shooting. The background of it all, as Tony understood it, was that Drury, along with his partner, Chape Kinnard, had been doing plenty of riding up and down the valley, besides taking in a great deal of the street when walking around town. If not exactly looking for trouble, neither were they doing any dodging if they met it.

Nearly a week previous Arlene Chancellor, riding to town alone, met up with Drury and Kinnard, out along the trail. They had stopped her, gotten pretty fresh. When Ward Chancellor heard of it he went berserk, stormed into town and met Drury in front of the Round Top saloon, where he called Drury cold. When the smoke lifted, Ward was down. A few who had seen it, said it was a dead even break, but that Drury was fast as a snake. The only good thing about it was that Doc Porter was now willing to say that Ward was going to make the grade.

Bill Marion remembered Kinnard and Drury as he had seen them the day they first came into Maverick and showed up at Sheriff Jim Freeburg's office to show their credentials. Kinnard, a big man, with bold eyes, sure of himself and moving with a swagger. Drury smaller, thinner, a waspish sort of man with a dead pan face, squinty eyes and a never still alertness. Both with tied down guns. A tough, tough pair, and he had warned the Chancellors of that fact. Maybe now, with Ward having come so close to getting it by Drury's gun, they would believe him.

"She's bad hombre, those two," said Tony, stropping his razor fiercely. "She's come in here, once or twice. Always together, never alone. And while I work on one, the other she's watch the street all the time.

WHEN he left the barbershop, Bill Marion headed straight for Doc Porter's little five room hospital. Not to say 'I told you so', but in honest concern over Ward Chancellor's condition and in the hope that Cleve and Dave might be there and now open perhaps to somewhat saner reasoning over this water problem than they had shown in the past.

He took a look along the street and saw a familiar auburn head coming his way. It was Arlene Chancellor, and

with her was the younger brother, Dave. He waited for them, but before they got to him, two men emerged from the swinging doors of the Round Top. Chape Kinnard and Max Drury, and they cut across the street at an angle that would put them in front of Dave and Arlene Chancellor.

The course of the railroad dicks was not a casual one—the angle of interception was too perfect for that. It was plainly a deliberate move, as Bill Marion saw it. So now he moved that way, too, coming up in back of Kinnard and Drury.

Dave Chancellor took his sister's arm, and started to swing past the two men, but Drury stepped in front of him. Kinnard stood a pace or two to one side, thumbs hooked in his gun belts, a half smile of sardonic mockery pulling at his lips. Bill Marion could not hear what Drury said, but he saw that Arlene's face was flaming with indignation.

There was nothing wrong with Dave Chancellor's nerve, even though he was but little more than a kid. He would have lunged right at Drury, had not Arlene caught him by the arm, pulling him back. "No!" she cried. "No, Dave! Don't you see what they are up to? They want an excuse to put you where Ward is—or worse. Dave—no!"

Arlene had it figured, all right. The thing was as deliberate and callous a maneuver as Bill Marion had ever seen, and it laid a current of white hot anger all through him. He closed in fast, so fast that he was within a stride of Max Drury before that worthy became aware of him. Drury whirled, going for his gun. And Bill, his gun already clear of the leather, hit Drury hard across the face with heavy bulk of it.

The effect was wicked. It knocked Drury end over end, his nose bridge caved in, flesh laid wide open. Bill Marion never gave him a second look, but spun to face Chape Kinnard, fully expecting to find Kinnard cutting down on him. But Kinnard wasn't even reaching for his gun. Instead, his hands were lifting to his ears, and he was looking at Dave Chancellor instead of at Bill. For Dave, using the startling moment of Marion's attack on Drury, had made his own draw and now held a clean drop on Kinnard.

Bill Marion rapped, "Good kid, Dave! Good kid—!"

Bill prowled up to Kinnard, lifted the fellow's guns, tossed them out into the street. "Now," he purred, holstering his own weapon, "now we'll see whether it is wolf or coyote. You know, Kinnard as long as you and Drury stayed on railroad property you might have packed some authority. But when you move out on to our own clean range and begin throwing your weight around, then you're asking for something—and getting it!"

WITH his last words, Bill gave Kinnard a back handed slap across the face. Kinnard blinked, cursed and came in swinging. Bill Marion took two solid smashes to the face before he got what he wanted, a clean shot at Kinnard's midriff. He made that one count. He brought Kinnard over, gasping and numb, then straightened him up again with one that he brought from way back, parking it under Kinnard's left eye. He pulped Kinnard's lips with a clubbing left, then sunk his right deep into Kinnard's middle again.

There was nothing fancy about Bill Marion in action. He merely took what Kinnard had to offer, then outhit him. Those two body wallops had taken a lot out of Kinnard, but he was tough and he stayed in there, hammering Bill

about the head and face until Bill, grimly concentrating, sunk his right fist a third time into Kinnard's quivering belly muscles.

That one put Kinnard over the edge and he began to slide. Bill kept after him, driving him back and back across the street, pounding him about the body until he had his man bent way over. Then he got home a right hand to the jaw that spun Kinnard half around and brought him down in the dust, where he stayed, sick and retching.

For a moment Bill stood over Kinnard, panting gustily. Then he said, "You don't rate as tough as you thought, Kinnard. You'll be wise to take that little rat of a partner of yours and catch the first train out of Washoe Valley. Else you might never leave."

Bill turned away, spat out a mouthful of blood, scrubbed the back of his hand across his puffed and bleeding lips, then went on across the street and into the Round Top. "Your water bucket and a spare towel, Pipe," he said to the bartender. "I stopped a couple out there."

Pipe Magee brought the bucket and the towel, and he also brought a stiff drink of whiskey. "It'll burn, Bill," he said. "But is will do you good. Put it away."

CHAPTER III

Fire In The Night

BY THE time Bill Marion had gotten all surface results of the fight cleaned away, Sheriff Jim Freeburg came in, a square, stocky man with a blunt jaw. He smiled grimly and said, "It seldom fails."

"What do you mean?" asked Bill.

"Why, it's the guy who does the least howling about what a woolly wolf he is, that really takes 'em apart when he finally does start. Meaning you."

Bill felt of his sore lips. "I kind of saw red for a minute," he admitted soberly. "Have a drink, Jim?"

Freeburg spun the whiskey in his glass before downing it. "I can't figure those two, Kinnard and Drury," he mused. "I been in the law business a long time, one way and another. In my time I've seen railroad detectives and none of 'em ever shaped up like those two. They don't seem to care a thin damn about going into that water tower dynamiting case, running down them who did it and bringing charges. All they seem to want to do is bull around the country hunting for trouble. Maybe I should give them a couple of floaters, and then again maybe I better not. You can't find out what they are up to if you run 'em out of the country."

"Meaning that you figure they are up to some kind of monkey business?" prompted Bill Marion. "That they are not all they seem?"

"What do you think? You're pretty long headed."

"I have done some wondering," Bill admitted. "Well, I got to be getting along. I got cows to bunch and bring in to the shipping corrals."

"Sound like you're getting ready for a hard summer, Bill," said Freeburg.

Bill shrugged, "Got to be able to use all the lower valley range to get my whole herd by in good shape. And without open water holes at Concho Springs, Devil's Knob and Three Pines you can't hold cattle on that lower range. So there's the answer."

"The rest of them, like the Chancellors, Boyd Hocken, Roblin and Pedlar —I haven't heard of them thinning down."

"The rest," said Bill slowly, "seem to figure things different than I do. Every man to his own opinion."

"Me," said Freeburg, "while I've lived all my life in cow country, I never ran a herd of my own. But more than once I've wondered why you cattlemen gamble so much on natural water. Seems to me that if you'd sink a few wells, put up windmills and build some troughs, it would be the best investment in the world. Then you'd always have water, have it right on your own range where nobody could fence it or take it away from you. Ever play with the idea, Bill?"

Bill Marion was staring steadily at nothing, but there was a quick gleam in his eye. "I am now," he said abruptly. "How, I ask you, could a man be so dumb not to have thought of that angle before? Meaning me—Bill Marion. Jim, you old blister, you've started something. I got to see Ray Tenny—now!"

Bill hurried out. Pipe Magee said, "You sure lit a fire under him, Jim."

Freeburg's eyes twinkled. "More'n one way to head off trouble. If I can get a flock of good friends of mine drilling wells in this valley, then I won't be faced with the unpleasant chore of going after them with warrants for raising hell with railroad property."

FOR the next few days Bill Marion spent most of his time in the saddle, behind some three hundred head of cattle which he and his four riders put into the shipping pens at Maverick, then loaded on cars and sent rolling east. This chore done, Marion went to Doc Porter's little hospital. He found Ward Chancellor thin and white and gaunt, but plainly well along the road to recovery. And he found Arlene Chancellor sitting at Ward's bedside.

Bill hesitated in the doorway. "If I'm not wanted, don't be afraid to say so, folks. Glad to see you coming along, Ward."

"Don't stand there like a blasted idiot," growled Ward weakly. "Come on in. Glad to see you, Bill. How are things on the range?"

"Coming along." Bill looked down at the girl. "How's the world with you, Slim?"

She looked, he thought, a trifle more grave than was her usual manner. But you couldn't tell what she was thinking. Slim would have made a good poker player.

"Things are pretty good," she said quietly. "I'll take this chance to say thanks for what you did the other day. Was it necessary to scurry right into the Round Top as soon as you finished cleaning up those two renegades?"

Bill fumbled with his hat. "I wasn't looking too good about then. That fellow Kinnard landed a couple on my phiz that didn't improve it any."

"Heard about that," said Ward. "We Chancellors owe you something, there. Drury and Kinnard were making a play to give Dave what Drury gave me, only worse. I understand you practically ruined Drury, left a permanent brand on him. He'll be back for more, that hombre. So you watch yourself, for he's poison with a gun, Bill."

Bill shrugged. "I'll watch him. See that you boys do the same."

"Arlie tells me you just shipped off a sizable chunk of your herd. What's the big idea?"

"I figure," said Bill, "a tough summer ahead. A tough summer for grass. So, better part of a herd in fair condition than a whole herd starving to death."

"Plenty of grass along the lower valley range," said Ward harshly.

"But not worth a thing to us without water."

"The water is there. Fences can be cut."

Bill shrugged again. "Seems we are right back to the same old argument, Ward. Well, I got to get along. Glad to see that you'll be forking leather again, one of these days. Be seeing you."

Arlene stood up. "I've some errands to do. I'll be back later, Ward."

SHE followed Bill out, and when they reached the street she said, "Will you do me a favor, Bill?"

Marion said, "You know I will, Slim. What is it?"

She hesitated, biting her lip a trifle. She spoke slowly, "I'm seeing things a great deal more clearly than I did at one time. What so nearly happened to Ward has opened my eyes. I wonder if you would take a ride out to the ranch and have another talk with Cleve?"

"What about, Slim?"

"This—this railroad trouble. Cleve is up to something, he and Boyd Hocken and Tack Pedlar. I don't know what it is, but they are scheming something. Maybe if you would talk to Cleve, tell him to go slow, it might do some good. Will you do that, Bill?"

"Sure I will, Slim. I'll talk to him like a Dutch Uncle."

"Thanks, Bill." She dropped a hand on his arm, smiled up at him.

"Like me again, Slim? Maybe a little bit?"

A faint tinge of color washed through her slightly drawn cheeks. "I've never quit liking you, Bill. Even when I've been angry at you. And I'm not angry any more."

"That's swell, Slim. I'll sure see Cleve."

WHEN Bill Marion pulled in at the Long C headquarters he found Cleve Chancellor, Boyd Hocken and Tack Pedlar squatting on their heels, smoking, in the shade of the big sycamore tree in front of the ranchhouse. They viewed Bill's arrival with little enthusiasm as he dismounted, hunkered down and reached for his smoking. There was still a faint trace of swelling about his lips where Chape Kinnard's hard fists had landed.

Cleve Chancellor said drily, "While I'm thinking about it I'll say thanks for giving Arlie and Dave a boost the other day, Marion."

"History," said Bill briefly. "Forget it."

"Question is, will Kinnard and Drury forget it? I doubt it."

"It doesn't matter, one way or the other. Got more important things to talk to you about."

"Here we go again," murmured Boyd Hocken. "I feel it coming up. One of those sermons."

Bill fixed him with a level glance. "If the listening hurts your ears, you don't need to stick around."

Cleve Chancellor broke in swiftly. "You got something on your mind, Bill. What is it?"

"Water," said Marion succinctly. "Out of the ground. Water from wells. Among other things he is doing for me, I got Ray Tenny rounding up a well drilling outfit in Caledon, with orders to send it to Washoe Valley as soon as possible. With wells down, with windmills to do the pumping and troughs to hold the water, we can laugh at the railroad. I'm ready to pay the freight charges, both ways. But I'm not setting myself up as a Santa Claus, so if you fellows want to buy in and share expenses, it'll be all right with me. How about it?"

Cleve Chancellor stubbed out his cigarette butt in the dust beside him. "Maybe you got something there, Bill. Maybe you have," he said slowly.

"Not for me," growled Boyd Hocken.

"That sort of thing would be dodging the issue, side-stepping, taking the easy way out. And I'm not built that way. Nobody rubs my nose in the dirt and gets away with it. All the water we need, or will ever need, is right there at Concho Springs, at Devil's Knob and Three Pines. When we make the damned railroad realize they can't hog that water and get away with it, they'll be good dogs from there on out. If we side-step this challenge, they'll bully-rag us for the rest of our days. No sir—none of this meek, spineless, side-stepping business for me."

A SLOW tide of red spilled across Bill Marion's face. Hocken was at it again, putting the rawhide to him. Bill gave it back to him. "There are some in these parts who have managed to side-step Kinnard and Drury, and there are some who haven't. Which class do you fall in, Hocken?"

Boyd Hocken's black eyes began to moil. Cleve Chancellor said harshly, "Take it slow, you two. Damn it all, can't you come together without starting to snarl at each other?"

"I wasn't snarling when I came out here," pointed out Bill Marion. "And I don't enjoy doing it. But now is a good time for me to say something, once and for all and finally. I've warned you before, Hocken. This is cold turkey, and the last time. Don't ever throw any more talk against my nerve. Keep your damned tommyhawk in your belt, from now on, because the next time you draw it on me, I shove it down your throat. I'm fed plumb up to here with your nasty tongue.

Bill's eyes were grey ice and Hocken's black ones shifted and looked away. For of a sudden Bill Marion was a highly dangerous man, and Hocken recognized the signs fully. Bill got to his feet, saying curtly, "Interested in my well drilling idea, Cleve? How about you, Tack?"

Pedlar just shrugged. Cleve said, "I'll think on it. But don't count on me."

"I won't. But Slim does. While your thinking of everything else, think a little of her. And if you let Pedlar and Hocken sell you on another wild soirree against the railroad, you're plain jackass. Just because you got away with dynamiting the water tower at Concho Springs, don't figure other things will be the same. The only reason you aren't in the jug for that job right now is because the railroad hasn't spurred Jim Freeburg to come get you. Just why I've no idea, right now. We'll probably find out, later on. But in the mean time, for the Lord's sake use your head for something else than to keep your ears spread."

Coldly angry, Bill stepped over to the dun, hit leather and spurred away. Hocken! Damn Hocken anyway! For a minute there it seemed he might have had Cleve coming his way. Until Hocken had put in his two-bits worth. Now he'd have to go this well drilling idea alone. Which was all right, too. He'd been making a lone fight of it, so far. He could keep on that way.

It would be, thought Bill, a week or ten days probably, before he'd hear from Ray Tenny again, and the best place to spend that time would be out with his crew and his cattle. Town seemed to hand nothing but trouble.

He was under no illusions over the outcome of his row with Kinnard and Drury. They'd never rest, those two, or more especially Drury, until they had a try at getting even. Well, it would be time to worry about that when it came along. In the meantime, he'd keep his eyes open and away from town.

THE best part of a week went by and Bill Marion spent all of it right in

his own back yard, so to speak. He spent most of the time in the saddle, riding with his crew, keeping the remainder of his herd back on the higher range, well away from the railroad. There was still enough graze here to get by for a few weeks more. Once he had a couple of wells producing water would be time enough to let the cattle drift down to the lower valley range.

Then, one evening, just at sundown, it was Rip Roblin who came jogging up to headquarters. Bill hadn't see Roblin since that first evening at the Long C. Old Rip seemed more quiet and thoughtful than usual. "Light and rest your saddle, Rip," invited Bill. "Supper will soon be ready."

Rip nodded, got down and loosened the cinch of his saddle. "Saw Jim Freeburg in town," he said. "He told me about this well drilling idea that you're interested in, Bill. I came over to tell you that you can figure on me paying my share of the expenses on the proposition. It makes good sense to me."

Bill grinned. "That's good news. Not so much because of the money involved, Rip, but because it means you're beginning to think my way a little."

"Not a little—a lot, Bill," said Rip soberly. "Seeing how near Ward Chancellor came to getting it sort of loosened up some of the bone in my thick head, and made me see the weak spots in the wild, hell raising schemes the Chancellor boys and Hocken and Pedlar been cooking up. I knew I couldn't sit in the middle of this thing and not carry my share of the load, one way or another. It was just a case of making up my mind whose game I was going to tie in with, yours or theirs. It adds up to yours. Oh, not that I'm particularly worried about my own hide sopping up some lead. But I don't want to see any of my friends get it."

"You might drop in at the Long C and try and get Cleve Chancellor to seeing things that way. I tried it the other day and had him coming my way a little until Boyd Hocken butted in with some more of that fire-eating talk of his and spoiled things."

"I can't quite figure Boyd," admitted Roblin. "He isn't the easiest man in the world to get acquainted with. There is a lot goes on inside his head that he never lets anybody see. Saw him in town the other day, just coming out of the railroad station, where he'd been talking to Jenkins, the agent. Which surprised me, plenty. For from the talk he's made in the past, I thought the only way he'd ever go near the railroad would be with a torch in one hand and a gun in the other."

Bill Marion's eyes narrowed. "Hocken will take some understanding, for a fact. As will Tack Pedlar."

Rip laughed shortly. "Once I saw a dog fight. There were five or six mixed up in it. There was one undersized mongrel running around the edge of things, making more noise than all the rest put together, but never once actually getting into the row and running the risk of getting its hide chawed. Well, that's Tack Pedlar, all over."

Bill chuckled. "Tack probably wouldn't be flattered any at the comparison, Rip—but I never heard a truer one. Let's eat on that.

LATER they sat on the steps of the ranchhouse to smoke and watch the night settle in over the valley below, blue and still. They talked idly of this and that, and for a time it seemed that the valley must be as peaceful a range as it looked. Then, as Roblin got ready to leave and was tightening his cinch again, he paused, stared off across his saddle down into that quiet valley.

"Come take a look, Bill," he called.

"What do you make of that?"

Bill came over beside him and took a look. Far down there was a red glow, which, even as they watched, grew and bloomed. A fire of some sort. Not a grass fire, for, though it towered, it did not spread.

Rip Roblin had been calculating distance, direction and geography. "I'd call it just about at Pipe Clay Wash, which doesn't make sense, either, for there is nothing along the Wash to produce a fire like that."

"Nothing," said Bill Marion grimly, "but the railroad trestle."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Roblin. "I wonder!"

Bill was already heading for the corrals. "Hold it a minute, Rip, while I catch up a bronc. I'll ride down that way with you."

It did not take Bill long to catch and saddle, but as he and Rip struck out the distant glow was already fading and by the time they had covered half a mile was gone altogether.

"It must have been the trestle, all right," said Roblin nervously. "While you were saddling up there was a big funnel of flame and sparks like it had collapsed and then it began to fade out, fast. You don't think—it wouldn't be those crazy fools—Cleve and Hocken and Pedlar—hitting at the railroad by setting fire—?"

"I don't know what to think," growled Bill savagely. "One thing is certain. It wouldn't start by itself."

Now came a sound which made them swing their head and look west toward the lower reaches of the valley. The long, lonely bay of a train whistle. They saw the reaching beam of the headlight. It was not swinging in onto the siding at the Concho Springs water tower, lately rebuilt after the dynamiting. Instead it was boring right on up valley.

"It's Thursday," groaned Rip Roblin. "And that's the local passenger that runs through as far as Division Point at Humboldt, on Thursday nights. My God—Bill, if that trestle is out—!"

Bill Marion wasn't listening. He had gigged the dun into a wild run, slashing down slope with every ounce of speed the horse possessed. Rip Roblin spurred madly after him.

Both men carried the same thought, the same fear. That train, speeding through the dark, toward a trestle that wasn't there any more. The headlight beam of the engine reached only so far. By the time the glow of it picked up that empty gap where the trestle had stood, maybe the engineer could stop in time, maybe he couldn't—! If they could get to the right of way in time to give some kind of a warning—!

Bill Marion was plenty fond of that favorite line backed dun horse of his, yet he now used the spurs on it as he had never used them before. The horse responded, running like a frightened shadow, drawing steadily away from Rip Roblin's laboring mount.

Bill was thinking thoughts which left him feeling cold and hollow inside. Men could hang for this—for burning that trestle. Cleve Chancellor could hang—if he'd had a part in it. . . .

THERE was speed in a horse like the dun. But there was more speed in steam driven wheels. Bill Marion saw, with a kind of stupifying despair that he and Rip didn't have a chance of heading off that train in time. In sheer desperation he dragged a gun and began to shoot, hoping that the reports, the thin, lancing flame might catch the eye or ear of that engine crew and alert them enough—enough—.

They were still a good quarter of a mile from the right of way when the farthest reach of the headlight touched

Pipe Clay Wash. And for a few fatal seconds there was no reaction. And then Bill saw thin streams of sparks begin to spurt where steel brake shoes suddenly gripped madly at racing wheels. Even at that distance, above the pound of the dun's hoofs, the roar of the wind in his ears, Bill caught the metallic, squealing torment of the agonized efforts of the lurching, bucking train to come to a halt.

But speed was a ponderable and distance was ponderable and time was a ponderable, and there was too much of the first and not enough of the latter two to strike a favorable equation. That headlight beam, sliding along at a level, suddenly tipped and dove from sight.

The impact was like the thud of a distant explosion. The crash a rending, tearing, shriek of twisted, tortured steel, like no sound Bill Marion had ever heard before. A sound which froze a man's heart and locked his jaws in an aching vise. Then a first, stunned stillness, broke only by the hard hiss of escaping steam

CHAPTER IV

Rolling Smoke

GREY dawn lay over the town of Maverick in a cool, moist hush. Most of the town was still asleep. But there was a light going in Sheriff Jim Freeburg's office. Gathered in that office were Freeburg, Bill Marion, Rip Roblin and Cleve Chancellor.

Bill Marion looked like he hadn't slept for a week. His face was haggard, his eyes sunk deep. Rip Roblin looked much the same. Cleve Chancellor was more subdued than any of them had ever seen him. Sheriff Jim Freeburg was grim, with a cold, hard glint in his eye. He said curtly, "It's well for you, Cleve, that you have a complete alibi—that you were with Ward and Arlene at Doc Porter's place from sunset on up to the time the wreck took place. Else you'd be in one hell of a tough spot right now, everything considered. You can go on home—and you stay there, understand! I've had all the worrying I want about you and Dave and Ward. I don't want to hear of either of you opening your traps or looking side ways from here on out."

Cleve nodded, picked up his hat and went out. Freeburg turned to Bill and Rip. "You fellows better get some sleep. I'm going out to the wreck for another look around in the daylight."

Bill stumbled out. Sleep! What chance had he of sleeping? Not after what he'd seen and heard. Not after digging through mangled steel for mangled people. And one of them Ray Tenny!

Ray Tenny, who had died in his arms, after gasping out the information he was bringing back to Maverick, for him. And the engine crew, crushed and caught in the scalding steam. And others—! Marion scrubbed his haggard face with his hands, thinking that he'd never sleep again. Besides, there were things to be done. A trip to Caledon, for one thing, to have a talk with this fellow Devore—this man who had fenced waterholes against a given pledge, who had, indirectly, contributed to that train wreck, who had refused to allow a well drilling outfit to be shipped in to Washoe valley by train. Who seemed intent, for no good reason that Bill could figure out, on raising hell and putting a rock under it. Yes, definitely he had to have a talk with Mister Arnold Devore.

Bill was all the way down to the railroad station before he realized there was no use trying to buy a ticket to Caledon just now. There'd be no west bound trains until the wreck was

cleared away and the trestle rebuilt across Pipe Clay Wash. His only chance of getting to Caledon in a hurry was to ride out to the Wash and hook a ride from there into Caledon on one of the wrecker trains running back and forth.

He was turning back toward town when he heard it, the clink of steel on steel, the clash of a spur chain it was, on one of the track rails.

For the life of him, Bill could not have explained why he did what he did. Maybe when a man had been living for the past sixteen hours in a world of chaos and disaster, his nerve ends were ragged and jangling, his instincts raw and jumpy. At any rate, Bill threw himself to the right, diving for the earth, twisting in mid-air as he went. He landed on his left side and shoulder, skidding. But his right arm and hand were free to whip out his gun.

IT WAS the waspish, malignant figure of Max Drury that Bill saw there, just clear of the tracks. Drury, slightly crouched, both guns out and chopping down. The flat blare of the twin reports hammered Bill's ears and the lead went where Bill had been, that fractional second before. Drury, cursing bitterly as he realized he had missed, rocked his guns back for another try. Bill's gun, stabbing level, snarled just ahead of that try.

Drury staggered slightly, his right arm jerked back by some powerful, invisible force. His right hand gun, just going off, kicked clear out of his fingers. The slug from it dug into the earth and sprayed Bill's face and eyes with dust. Drury's other gun, blaring at the same moment, slashed a ribbon of felt from the brim of Bill's hat.

Drury was just a formless blot now, through the dust that stung and half blinded Bill Marion's eyes, but Bill drove a second slug at that blot, and a third. Drury turned full around, his back to Bill, took two steps as though walking away. Then all structure seemed to pour right out of him and he went down in a loose heap.

Bill lunged to his feet, scrubbing at the dust in his eyes. And as the stinging tears cleared from them, he saw Jenkins, the paunchy station agent, staring out of the station door.

"You killed him," Jenkins was mumbling. "You killed—Max Drury!"

"Yeah," rapped Bill, "and I got more lead in this gun for you, unless you talk damn straight and fast."

For this whole thing had done something to Bill. It had unlocked that frozen, stupified feeling that had held Bill ever since the wreck. Now he was thinking again, clear and cool. And he was tying two things together, something which Rip Roblin had told him and something Ray Tenny had told him, with the last breath in his crushed body.

"What have I got to talk about?" stuttered Jenkins, backing up as Bill followed him into the station. "I ain't done nothin'.

"I think you did," rapped Bill. "I think you sent a message over your telegraph wire to Caledon, concerning a well drilling outfit. You did, didn't you?"

THE question was like a blow, Bill jabbing out with his gun, for emphasis.

Jenkins gulped and nodded. "I did. No crime in that, is there? I just work for the railroad and I follow the orders I get from the big boss."

"That would be Devore. Maybe you know why he seems intent on not merely hogging water, but on running all the cattlemen out of this valley?"

Jenkins shrugged. "I don't know anything about that sort of thing. All

I know is who pays my wages."

The clatter of hoofs sounded. It was Sheriff Jim Freeburg who came spurring up. He looked at the crumpled figure of Max Drury, at Bill Marion. "I'm just heading out for Pipe Clay Wash when I hear the shooting. So I came back afoggin'. Tell me about it, Bill."

Bill told him. "He must have been holed up around this station house, Jim. Anyhow, he was coming up in back of me. He should have had me dead to rights, but for some reason he missed."

Freeburg was looking at the bullet torn brim of Bill's hat. "Not by a hell of a ways," he grunted. "What about—him?" He nodded towards Jenkins.

"Just asking him some questions. To see just how far he figures to ride in this sort of thing."

"I ain't throwin' a gun on nobody," Jenkins blurted. "I'm just workin' for the road and trying to earn my wages."

"You want to see that earning those wages don't put you out on a limb further than you can back off," said Jim Freeburg bleakly. "You go chumming up too close with hombres like Drury, and you'll be tagged with the same label."

Bill Marion said, putting away his gun, "Wait until I get my bronc, Jim. I'm heading out to the Wash, myself."

CALEDON was big enough to swallow a dozen towns like Maverick, though it still possessed an atmosphere of being close enough to the old days that Bill Marion did not feel out of place when he swung down from the steps of the caboose of a five car wrecking train that had returned from Pipe Clay Wash after more equipment.

The railroad yards were sprawling, with a big roundhouse that gave off steam and smoke and the clatter of industry. The train crew had objected to Bill riding in with them from the Wash until Sheriff Jim Freeburg had stepped in and flashed the authority of his star. "For all you know, this man is on business for me," said Freeburg. "I say he rides with you to Caledon."

And so, Bill had ridden.

He looked about, now, found the main office building and began asking his way to Arnold Devore. A couple of office underlings were tempted to give Bill the runaround until they marked the grey chill in his eyes, the bleakness of his craggy face. Then they sobered, and presently Bill found himself in an office with a huge oaken desk. And across that desk sat Arnold Devore.

As Ray Tenny had said, the man was a big, handsome devil. But in Bill's quick, steady scrutiny, he marked two features which were the tip-off. Bill Marion liked eyes wide apart in man or horse, and Devore's were anything but that. And there was a curl to Devore's lips and a pressure at the corners which told of greed and the lust for power. But also, the man was smooth, for his manner was almost cordial. "I'm very busy," he said. "But I can give you five minutes. What is your business?"

Bill Marion did not beat around the bush. He pointed to the ripped brim of his hat. "That's where Max Drury's slug went," he said harshly. "Mine went straighter. Drury is dead. Thought that might interest you, Devore."

Devore's fingers, which had been tapping his desk top, went still. "That is a startling statement. It is a casual thing with you, then—to kill a man?"

"In Washoe Valley we rate Drury's kind as two legged coyotes."

"You also dynamite water towers and burn trestles," purred Devore. "The last causing a bad wreck and costing the lives of several people. There will be some far reaching effects over that

wreck."

Bill grinned mirthlessly. "Especially when the real truth gets out. Which it is due to. Devore, just what is your game against the cattlemen of Washoe Valley? Now you wouldn't be trying to run us out of the valley complete, would you?"

A curtain dropped over Devore's eyes, a frozen mask over his face. "I haven't time to listen to foolish talk," he grated. The oily smoothness of the man was all gone, now. "The interests of the railroad are wholly my interests."

"Then why do the road out of freight revenue by refusing to let a well drilling outfit be shipped in to Washoe Valley," Bill rapped, "after getting a wire through Jenkins, your station agent at Maverick, telling what that drilling outfit was to be used for?"

THE curtain over Devore's eyes thickened. "I don't know what you are talking about. But I do know this. I'm in no mood to be bullied around by some range hobo. You go out the same way you came in, mister."

Bill's mirthless grin became an equally mirthless laugh. "Keno. Only remember this, Devore. When the chips are down there is always a pet jackal who thinks more of his hide than he does of dirty money. So he talks. And enough of the right kind of talk can hang men—even you." With that, Bill left the place.

Half an hour later Bill Marion was talking to a stocky, powerfully built man with a bushy red beard. "I wouldn't try and fool you, Abernathy," said Bill. "I can't promise you a thing except that you will be paid, and well paid for the job. But you may have to drill a well with one hand and fight with the other."

Abernathy grinned hardly in that red beard. "If the money is there I'll drill a well in the center of hell. It will be slow business, hauling my rig in by freight wagon from here to Washoe Valley. But I'll be there. And if I have to break a few heads to get there, that will be all right, too. Kind of even up for that Ray Tenny. He was a nice young feller, Tenny was."

Bill, staring at nothing with shadowed eyes, nodded. "He was the pure quill. Then I'll be expecting you some time next week, Abernathy?"

"I'll be there," vowed the red beard. "With bells."

There was a short freight, carrying new rails and girders for a new trestle across Pipe Clay Wash, making up in the railroad yards. A brakeman on the steps of the caboose shook his head. "Not a chance, mister. Nobody rides this train except railroad employees."

Bill Marion was in no position to argue. This was not Washoe Valley, with Sheriff Jim Freeburg handy to throw the power of his star into the argument. It had been one thing to get into Caledon. It would be something else, apparently, to get out again. Bill turned away, seeing the probable necessity of hiring a saddle bronc and riding rig for the long trip home.

A voice at his elbow said, "What's the matter, cowboy—left afoot?"

BILL turned to face the speaker, a man of medium size, with the keenest of blue eyes and grizzled of hair and mustache, a man dressed in a quiet, grey business suit.

"Something like that," said Bill warily.

The man in grey smiled and called to the brakeman. "Don't pull out without me and my friend here, Tomlin."

The brakeman shrugged. "Just as you say, Mr. Conroy."

Bill, still wary, said, "Strangers don't usually render favors without expecting

something in return. What is it you want, friend?"

Conroy's smiled deepened. "A little talk with you. But first, I'd like to state that it is not the policy of the railroad to push cattlemen around. Not at all!"

"This road," growled Bill harshly, "is making a pretty good attempt at it. I don't get your drift, Conroy."

Conroy pulled back his coat, showing a badge pinned to his vest. "Another railroad dick, eh?" said Bill. "Sorry if I can't warm up. The last two of your kind this road turned loose were strictly coyote."

"If you mean Drury and Kinnard, I agree with you," was Conroy's surprising statement. "Only, they were not accredited representatives of the railroad, but of one man."

"Arnold Devore?" snapped Bill.

Conroy's glance was very level and steady. "Arnold Devore," he nodded.

"Then," said Bill, "I think that you and I can talk, Mr. Conroy."

They did talk, while they rode in the caboose of the repair train, all the way back to Washoe Valley.

CHAPTER V

Fangs of Tragedy

THERE was a light in Ward Chancellor's room in Doc Porter's little hospital and when Bill Marion knocked it was Arlene who opened the door, with a welcoming smile that was quick and warm. "Bill! Come on in. We were just talking about you."

Bill smiled down at her gravely. "No wonder my ears were burning, Slim."

All the Chancellors were there and Ward, looking much better, was sitting propped up in bed. He said, "Yeah, Bill—we had you on the grid and were just about decided that you had more savvy in that old noggin of yours than all the rest of us put together. Cleve here, has been telling us about that well drilling idea of yours. It sounds good, so good we want some of it, providing you can locate an outfit to do the work."

"I've got one" said Bill. "It is coming in by freight wagon from Caledon. When I get through with it, you can use it. Then Rip Roblin wants in on it, too."

Cleve said, almost sullenly, "It sort of gripes, just the same, to turn all sweetness and light, after the tough talk we made to begin with. It makes us shape up more or less as four-flushers. Bill here, of course, is in the clear. He never did make the big talk we did."

"We'll put the big talk down to just plain damn foolishness," said Ward sharply. "Lying here in this bed, day after day, I've done a lot of thinking.

"I realize that I came so close to closing the book for good, it wasn't funny. I can see now that the stunt Drury and Kinnard pulled of acting rough to Arlie was just bait to bring me up to the kind of fool play I made. Those jiggers were not sent here to guard railroad property. They were sent here to rub us out. And it took good old Bill here, who never made any tough talk at all to give them what for. And to come up with the answer to our main trouble with this well proposition. In the future I want to see all the Chancellors do a lot less talking and a lot more thinking. You understand that, Cleve—and you, Dave?"

Cleve shrugged. "We've always worked together in the past. If that's the way you want it, Ward—that is the way it will be."

Arlene, her eyes shining, exclaimed, "Now I love you all. I'm happier tonight than I've been for a long time."

Bill Marion smiled down at her. "That, it seems to me, is worth an awful lot."

Bootheels sounded in the hall outside, moving with just a hint of urgency. The door was opened without a knock and Boyd Hocken came in. There was dust and the reek of sweating horseflesh upon him. A restless glitter lay in his black eyes, but the glitter filmed over as he saw Bill Marion.

Ward said, almost curtly, "Looks like you been doing some fast traveling, Boyd."

Hocken shrugged. "Just got in from Devil's Knob and Three Pines. Cows are drinking there again. I took a pair of wire cutters along. The damned railroad will have to build some new fences around those water holes."

A SILENCE fell which grew and thickened and became filled with strain. Ward broke it with quiet emphasis. "The Chancellors have changed their minds on a lot of things, Boyd. We are definitely not in on any more deviltry against the railroad. Not any of us."

Hocken blazed a quick glance at Bill Marion. "The old Holy Joe has converted you, eh?"

"Yes, and no. Put it down mainly that we've just come to our senses—in time. That train wreck was bad business—mighty bad business."

Hocken built a cigarette with tight, quick little gestures. "What's that got to do with us? Ain't the first trestle that's been burned by a stray cinder from an engine fire box, dropping among the joists and laying there smouldering until it worked up into a blaze. Nobody set that fire. It just started of its own accord."

Cleve stared at the floor, shuffling his feet restlessly. Bill Marion said, "Got to be drifting, Ward. I got some windmills to order from Pete Stewart. When'll you be heading home to the ranch?"

"Doc says I can leave tomorrow. It sure will be good to get shut of these four walls. Be seeing you, fellah."

Arlene followed Bill out into the hall and slipped a hand inside his arm. "Things I want to say to you, Bill Marion," she mummured.

She was silent until they stood on the porch of the little hospital. There she mumured, "Lean over, Bill."

Wondering, he did so, and found a pair of warm lips pressed to his own. As swiftly she slipped away and from the doorway said softly, "That, to repay for any mean things I ever said and did in the past, Bill."

Then she was gone, back into the building.

Pete Stewart was just about to close up his big general store for the night. Bill Marion said, "Get out your catalogues, Pete. On windmills. I got a real order for you."

They spent an hour poring over the literature and Bill made his selections. "I want three of these mills, Pete, complete with pipe, pump, valves and all the fixin's. And concrete, a whole flock of it. You don't know it, but I'm opening up a new line of business for you. You'll be ordering a lot of this stuff before summer is over."

When Marion left the store he found a man standing beside the big dun horse. It was Sheriff Jim Freeburg. He said wearily, "Feel like taking a little ride, Bill?"

Bill said, "Sure, Jim. Anywhere you say."

THEY were silent out of town and for a mile beyond. Then Freeburg said, "I never looked for a sign so hard in my life, Bill. There was a little, but it petered out on me, and not enough

of it to make a case. I worked Pipe Clay Wash for a good two miles up and down, both sides of where the trestle had been."

"Maybe we're chasing a wrong theory, Jim," said Bill. "Maybe it started from a cinder from an engine fire box."

"Maybe," said Freeburg drily, "only it didn't. I'm chasing another angle."

This 'angle' led to Freeburg turning presently into the Tepee trail, which led to Tack Pedlar's headquarters. The bunkhouse was dark but there was a light in the corner room of the ranchhouse, which Pedlar used as an office. "Looks like Tack might be sitting up late, counting his money," drawled Bill.

Freeburg reined in and dismounted. "We'll sneak in quiet and see."

As Bill swung down and, following the sheriff's example took off his spurs and hung them on his saddle horn, he said, "What do you really expect to find, Jim?"

"Probably nothing. But I ain't overlooking any bets."

They prowled in past the corrals, past the dark bunkhouse and came up against the side of the ranchhouse, working along this until they were crouched beside the lighted window. Straightening just outside the light flare, Freeburg took a look, and Bill sensed the startled stiffening of the sheriff. Freeburg murmured, "Take a look, Bill."

Inside, Tack Pedlar sat alone before a battered old table. Pedlar was slumped far down in his chair and there was a beaked, drawn, bloodless look to his face. On the table before him, stood a whiskey bottle and beside it lay a .45 Colt gun. In one hand Pedlar held a glass, brimming full of whiskey.

Even as Bill watched, Pedlar tossed down the drink and poured another. This time he left the glass on the table and picked up the six shooter, staring at it with a terrible intentness. He half lifted it, the muzzle swinging toward his head. Then he shuddered violently, dropped the gun on the table and grabbed for the glass again.

Jim Freeburg's hand clamped down like a vise on Bill's arm. "He's working up whiskey courage enough to blow his own brains out," muttered Freeburg. "Watch him, Bill—watch him close! If he grabs that gun again and looks like he really means business, plug him in the arm or shoulder. But don't let him finish himself. That hombre knows things we want to know!"

Then Freeburg was gone, silent as a shadow around toward the rear of the house.

IT WAS the strangest vigil Bill Marion ever kept. He drew his gun and held it ready. Turmoil was going on in the soul of the wretched human being he was watching, turmoil that had torn his nerves to bits, shorn him of all human dignity, made of him a cowering, craven wreck, afraid of life, afraid of death and calling on whiskey to give him courage enough to quit the one and greet the other. It gave Bill a feeling of nausea, almost of physical sickness.

The seconds ticked away, the minutes and so it seemed to Bill Marion, the hours. Pedlar reached for the whiskey glass, stared at it with glazed eyes. Already the man was very drunk. He lifted it, drank in gulps. Some of the liquor dripped from his chin. He dropped the glass and it broke with a crash. And he grabbed up the gun in a sort of frenzy. Bill Marion pulled down on him, aiming for the point of the shoulder.

And then Jim Freeburg shot into the room and came across it like a hurtling

projectile. He crashed into Tack Pedlar, knocking him end over end, following him up and dropping on him, wrenching the gun from his dazed fingers.

Bill slid up the window sash and climbed into the room. Pedlar was crying out in a thin, wild way, "I can't stand it—I can't stand it! Everywhere I look, they're there, watching me. The people, killed in that wreck—they're watching me—! I can't stand it—any longer—!"

"Who," rapped Jim Freeburg, "helped you burn that trestle?"

"Hocken—and Kinnard—! We didn't figure—there'd ever be—a wreck—!"

CHAPTER VI

Tightening Coils

WAY over at the wagon pass across the Black Hawk Mountains, Bill Marion and his four riders met Abernathy, of the red beard, and his well drilling outfit. There were three wagons. Abernathy drove one of these, his two helpers handling the others. Abernathy, stopping to breathe his team, gnawed at a plug of tobacco and asked, "Why all the men, all the guns, Marion?"

Bill shrugged. "Just in case. In view of—this and that, I wanted to play safe."

Abernathy nodded. "You know this country and the people in it better than I do. But there ain't been a mite of trouble, so far."

"You're not there, yet," said Bill significantly.

All that day Bill and his men kept the country ahead and on both sides well scouted. When they camped that night they kept guard in shifts. There was no alarm and in the early dawn the wagons were rolling again.

The second night camp was in the lower end of Washoe Valley and Bill told Abernathy, "By this time tomorrow we'll be on home range."

The youngest of Bill's riders, Buddy Scott and Charley Dee, stood the watch up to midnight, and reported all clear when Bill and his foreman, grizzled Dobe Hart, took over.

The small hours of the morning were slow and cold. Hunkered down, Bill smoked them away stoically, immersed in his thoughts. Mostly he thought of the disclosures that had come from the haunted, babbling lips of Tack Pedlar, when Sheriff Jim Freeburg and Bill had stopped him in his act of self-destruction.

Pedlar's talk had laid light on many points and had utterly damned himself and Boyd Hocken as traitors and schemers of the blackest dye, men who had set out deliberately to double-cross friend and neighbor in the quest of larger material gain.

It was queer the way Hocken had dropped from sight. For immediately after Tack Pedlar's broken testimony, Jim Freeburg had gone after Hocken, whom Bill had seen but a few short hours before, in Ward Chancellor's hospital room. But an eighteen hour search by Freeburg had brought nothing and no one seemed to have the slightest idea what had become of Hocken.

Chape Kinnard? Well, no one had seen anything of Kinnard, either, not since the day before Bill had shot it out with Max Drury, though the word was out that a small group of some half a dozen strange riders had been seen drifting around the edge of the valley, with apparently no particular business at hand. All of which had decided Bill Marion that it might be wise to meet up with Abernathy and guard that precious well drilling outfit safely through. Now, it seemed, there had

been no need of that.

The next moment, Bill knew better, for over west of the camp, pouring down through the blackness, came the sudden, swift mutter of pounding, charging hoofs.

Bill yelled, "Behind us, Dobe! Over west—!"

Then he was up and running to meet the threat.

THEY came in fast, the attackers, silent until Bill, straining for a glimpse in the elusive, mocking light of the pale, cold stars, flung his first shot. There was immediate answering lead and a yell that came in the voice of Chape Kinnard.

"The horses—stampede their horses!"

Bent low, Bill Marion charged to block off this intent. He threw shot after shot, though with little hope of connecting which such an indistinct, shifting target. Then, right above him was the bulk of a charging rider and Bill slashed a shot at him, close and point blank. He saw the rider weave, then go off in a long, tumbling fall.

Bill heard a hurtling slug strike flesh solidly and one of the picketed horses, plunging and rearing in fright, grunted and collapsed in its tracks. But now, rifles were crashing and snarling from among the wagons and Buddy Scott's voice lifted in a whoop of defiance. Close by Bill Marion a Winchester was spanging and spanging again and between shots Bill could hear Dobe Hart swearing in a steady monotone.

The raiders had apparently run into considerably more than they had bargained on, for they gave back, shooting as they went. Their lead buzzed and whistled, smacking into the wagons. But by now a full half dozen guns were answering and abruptly as it had come, the attack dwindled and ran out, to the echo of hoof beats speeding away into the tricky dawn shadows.

They grouped among the wagons, waiting for the true dawn, when they took stock. A dead man lay half in, half out of his blankets—one of Abernathy's men.

"All I know of him," said Abernathy grimly, "is that he claimed to have been a mule skinner. I needed an extra man man so I hired him. His name is Daggitt."

Aside from the dead man, Abernathy himself was the only other one who bore a scratch. This came from a flying splinter, gouged from the side of a wagon by a flying slug. It had furrowed a small cut, high up on the flat of his jaw and amounted to little.

The raider Bill Marion had downed was a stranger, and very dead. A hard looking case, even in death. The final casualty was Buddy Scott's saddle bronc and Buddy's voice lifted in youthful fury.

"Best little saddle bronc I ever straddled," wailed Buddy. "I'll get me a scalp for this."

"You," Bill said gravely, "will be driving one of Abernathy's wagons from here on in."

SO GRAVES were dug and filled and covered and the rising sun saw the wagons rolling forward again and without further incident pulled in at late afternoon on Bill Marion's range.

"Right about here was where I figured on one well," said Bill. "What do you think the chances are?"

Abernathy shrugged. "Been at this game all my life and the only sure thing I've learned about water is that it is like gold—where you find it. Yet, she's a big slope and water does run down hill. Formations you can't see, count a lot, too. On the average, I'd say your chances were pretty good right here.

I'll have to have a man to take Daggitt's place, though."

"You got four of them, right here," Bill told him. "Barney Fleet is a good camp cook. I'll have him set up camp for you. The other three boys can act as guards and help out any way you say."

"Which means that we'll have the rig set up, be spudded in and running drill by noon tomorrow," vowed Abernathy.

IT WAS just after sundown when Bill Marion again rode into Maverick. He went straight to Jim Freeburg's office and found the sheriff there. A freight train came clanking into town just after Bill crossed the tracks, which meant that the Pipe Clay Wash trestle had been replaced.

Jim Freeburg looked dusty and weary and impatient. "Any luck, Jim?" asked Bill.

Freeburg shook his head. "Not a lick, and I've rode myself to a shadow. Hocken and Kinnard just seem to have evaporated."

"I ran into Kinnard," said Bill. And then he told the story of the raid on the drilling outfit. "Whether Hocken was in that gang, I couldn't say," he finished. "How's Pedlar?"

"Lower than a snake's belly. I got him locked up tight, with a special deputy watching him day and night. By the way, that fellow Conroy wants to see you, Bill. You'll find him at the hotel. There is a real railroad dick, and a shrewd one."

Bill found Conroy sitting on the hotel porch, smoking a cigar. "Things seemed to have happened since I saw you last, Marion," greeted Conroy. "And, still more on the way. Thought you'd be interested in knowing that Mister Arnold Devore will be visiting this little town of Maverick tomorrow. Some of the directors will be with him. I hope, and believe, the moment will be auspicious to hang Mister Arnold Devore by the heels."

"Go on," said Bill. "I'm plenty interested."

Conroy blew out a big mouthful of smoke. "The strange goings on in this valley are only a part of the ambitious activities of Arnold Devore. There have been other manipulations along other lines which have worried some members on the board of directors, but which have been pretty difficult to pin down definitely enough to make a case against Devore. I know, because I've been working on the matter for months. Here, however, in light of what Jim Freeburg has gotten out of that fellow Pedlar, we have some real dynamite with which to smite the would be mighty one. It seemed a good idea to bring Devore face to face with Pedlar, so I have taken the necessary steps to bring Devore on the scene. Oh, he doesn't suspect why. It comes to him in the way of a suggestion by some of the directors to accompany them out here to Maverick on—er—a little inspection trip."

"There could be fireworks," drawled Bill.

Conroy grinned. "Fireworks are always interesting. I hope you'll be available for the showdown, as you seem to have some pretty good theories about this and that."

"I'll be here," promised Bill. "What time?"

"They'll be in on the ten o'clock local tomorrow morning."

CHAPTER VII

The Cleansing Fire

IT WAS nine o'clock the next morning when Bill Marion rode again

into Maverick. Jim Freeburg stood in the doorway of his office, yawning and stretching. "Had a night's sleep for a change," he admitted. "Figured it might help me think a little clearer in figuring out where I might locate Hocken and Kinnard, instead of just doing a lot of blind riding, here and there. Sort of make my head save my saddle, you might say. Had breakfast?"

Bill nodded. "Ate out with the drilling crew. Now I got to go see Pete Stewart and order up some extra stuff I'll need that Abernathy put me wise to. Knows his business, that fellow Abernathy."

They went over and down the street, splitting up as they came to the White Front eating house, Bill cutting across to Pete Stewart's store. Pipe Magee was just coming out of the White Front and Jim Freeburg paused to talk to him for a moment.

Bill Marion moved into the shade of the overhang of the store. As he did so, two men stepped quickly into view around the upper corner of the building. Chape Kinnard and Boyd Hocken! The spread out quickly, a dozen steps apart, and Kinnard said thinly, "See can you get clear of this one, Marion!"

Strange it was that Bill Marion was not extremely startled. For somehow, all along, he'd had the feeling that this was how it would be, sooner or later. For men did not move into your life, learn hate, and then move out again without a final expression of that hate. Especially when ever deepening desperation was whipping them on. It was like a storm, building up gradually, to roll its thunder and brandish its lightenings before blue sky could show again.

Bill squared away toward them. In Kinnard's eyes was a taunting mockery, born of the surety of having the odds, having the big edge. In Boyd Hocken's black ones lay only hate, livid hate, for once fully uncurtained. Bill said flatly, "Had to have the odds, eh? Both of you? Not tough enough to go it alone, after all the smoky talk about nerve, eh Hocken? Well—!"

Bill Marion went for his gun, went for it faster than ever before in his life, driven by the bitter cold knowledge that this was it, that the odds were long and that he could only do his best.

Somehow he felt that Kinnard was really the faster and more deadly of the two. Or maybe it was because Boyd Hocken had once been called friend. At any rate it was Kinnard he stabbed his gun at and felt the heavy recoil jar his wrist and rock his elbow back. He had to gamble that he'd made the shot good, and so get around on to Hocken before the latter cut him down like a helpless rabbit.

Even as he whirled, he heard the bellow of a gun. But there was no following shock, no rip and burn of lead biting into his hard set muscles. And the report seemed a trifle distant, as though his senses had gone weak on him and he could not bring sound into full focus.

Amazement held Bill in his tracks. For Boyd Hocken was down, flat on his back, as though smitten by lightening. Loping over from the White Front, naked gun still smoking, came Sheriff Jim Freeburg.

Bill swung back, looking for Chape Kinnard. Kinnard was down, on his face, nerveless fingers falling away from a gun half drawn.

Bill rocked a little, back and forth, as the strain ran out of him. He mumbled, almost stupidly. "The Lord must have been on my side—on my side—!"

Sheriff Jim Freeburg stood over Boyd Hocken, saying, "You ride your fool head off looking for them, and

can't pick up a trace. Then they step right out in front of you. That's the way it is, sometimes."

"MR. CONROY tells us, Sheriff Freeburg, that you have rounded up the men who burned the Pipe Clay Wash trestle and caused that disastrous wreck."

The speaker was a Mr. Kramer, a tall, spare, white haired man with a cool, crisp, direct manner. A director of the Pioneer & Central Railroad. With him was a Mr. Adams, stout, grim jawed, also a director. There also was Arnold Devore, General Manager, a mechanical smile on his handsome face, but with a queer cloud far back in his eyes. They stood in Jim Freeburg's office, and besides them and Freeburg, Conroy and Bill Marion were present.

To Kramer's words, Jim Freeburg nodded. "One of them is willing to talk. Probably you'd like to listen to him. Just a moment, gentlemen."

Freeburg disappeared into the hall that connected his office to the jail out back. He was back almost immediately and with him was Tack Pedlar, who seemed a thousand years old, so pinched and shriveled was he.

"All right, Tack," said Freeburg gruffly. "These men want to hear the story. Tell it!"

Pedlar talked like a man far, far away, like a man in a daze. "I never thought or dreamed of a wreck. Else I'd never have tied in with them. We left our horses way off and went in on foot. Hocken and Kinnard each carried enough kerosene to make it burn good. We touched it off and got out of there. From about two miles away we watched it burn. Then—later, that train came—."

Hocken broke off, licking his lips.

"Why did you burn the trestle, Tack?" asked Freeburg, like he was prompting a child.

"It was part of the deal. Hocken and me were to get all the range south of the tracks, while Devore was to get all the range on the north side."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Kramer. He was staring at Arnold Devore, hard. And Devore's smile was suddenly a frozen grimace, his eyes like those of a trapped animal. "A most extraordinary statement, Devore," said Kramer. "What have you to say to it?"

"The man's crazy," blurted Devore. "It's all sheer nonsense. The man is crazy, I tell you!"

"Perhaps," said Kramer icily. "This Hocken and Kinnard—you have them in custody also, Sheriff?"

"Of a kind," said Freeburg grimly. He turned to what appeared to be two long piles of blankets on the floor along an inner wall. He stripped the blankets aside and said, "They tried to spring a gun trap on Bill Marion. I happened to be close enough to buy in. Marion got Kinnard, I got Hocken."

THERE was a moment of complete quiet, then Freeburg drew the blankets into place again. "There is little testimony as a rule to be had from dead men," said Freeburg. "But here is something that was in Kinnard's pocket. I saw it before, the first day Kinnard and Drury showed here in Maverick. A letter of authority designating them as railroad detectives—signed by Arnold Devore."

"I hired them in good faith," blurted Devore desperately. "How could I have known they would turn out as they did?"

"You hired them," rapped Freeburg, "as gun thugs, pure and simple, to do two things. One was to commit acts of violence against railroad property in such a manner as to make it look like the decent cattlemen of this valley were

responsible, and so give you an apparently lawful reason to go after them. The other, if possible, was to push these cattlemen in to a gun fight and wipe them out. Either method would do, so long as it got results, and left a lot of fat range open for grabbing by you and Hocken and Pedlar."

"That," sneered Devore, "is presupposing on a pretty reckless scale. This whole thing is ridiculous, the silliest thing I ever listened to. I never heard of this Hocken or this Pedlar before in my life. Kramer, Adams, I protest this idiotic nonsense and I'm not listening to any more of it."

Conroy took his cigar from his mouth and spoke for the first time. "To the contrary, you'll listen to it, and more. I have here," and he drew from his pocket a sheaf of papers, "copies of a number of communications between you and Hocken and Kinnard, Mister Devore. Communications which traveled over our telegram wire, sent and received by Jenkins, our station agent. Jenkins, it seems, is quite a petty scoundrel in his own right, but a shrewd one. Shrewd enough to retain copies of the messages so that, in case of a double cross, he could clear his own skirts. These messages make very interesting reading, gentlemen—oh, very. Bill Marion, have you anything to add?"

"A little matter of Devore refusing to allow a well drilling outfit to be shipped in for me by railroad," said Bill."It seems he—."

Devore made his break. He had been fingering the watch chain across his vest nervously. Now his hand darted up under his coat and came away with a snub nosed shoulder holster gun. Instinctively, perhaps, he stabbed the gun toward Jim Freeburg, which was a mistake, for he was still within reach of Bill Marion's fist.

Devore just got out the hard spat words, "Don't move—anybody!", when Bill hit him on his handsome jaw, hit him plenty! Devore's feet crossed and he went down with a crash.

Watching Conroy snap a pair of thin, gleaming handcuffs on Devore, Kramer said slowly, "I doubt we can find a court that will actually hang him, but I hope so, I hope so. For he is as much responsible for the deaths of the people who died in that wreck, as are those who burned the trestle!"

BILL MARION sat his big, line backed dun horse a few yards away from his number one well. The wind was blowing and up atop its tower, the wind mill was spinning busily. From a pipe running out to the new, grey-white concrete trough, water gushed, sparkling in the sunshine. Half a dozen cattle stood around the circular, tank like trough, drinking. Out across the tawny slope where the heat waves danced, came another bunch of cattle, filing in to drink. Where the overflow of the tank spread its dark moisture, a tint of green was already showing and here, fluttering about, were black birds, their ebon cloaks sleek and trim, their yellow eyes bright and alert. A pair of meadow larks came winging in to drink, singing all the while.

Water! Water was life, it seemed, to all things. Water brought life, and death, concluded Bill moodily, thinking of snarling, smoking guns and men going down for the last time. He sighed deeply and lifted his head, and saw a solitary rider come loping his way. She pulled up beside him and Bill said gravely, "Hi, Slim! What do you think of it?"

She answered just as gravely. "It heralds the fact that never again will the question of water rights be lifted on this range. Even though the railroad

has taken its fences away from the old water holes, this is better."

"Much better," he agreed. "In time the right of way will have to be fenced on both sides, for mutual protection of our cattle and the trains. So we are that much ahead of the game right now."

He looked at her guardedly. It had been nearly a month since he had last seen her. She said, "Abernathy has hit good water at our first well. Bill, this range needed balance and a level head. You gave both. We all will never get over our debt to you."

Bill said, "I could have handled it better, thinking back. Then there wouldn't have been so much to regret."

She knew what he meant. "Boyd Hocken," she said steadily, "chose his own trail, one which still leaves me wondering about men and their ways. Posing as our very good friend, yet scheming all the time to embroil Ward and Dave and Cleve, to get them outside the law, to get them killed. And behind it all, to steal the range of his neighbors. Boyd Hocken fooled a lot of us, but he never did fool you, did he, Bill?"

"At first he did," confessed Bill. "Then I began to wonder. He was a strange man. You never knew what was going on inside his mind."

"I wish," she said, "I knew what was going on inside your mind."

"Such as—?"

"Such as, why have you been avoiding me lately? It has been nearly a month since we had a talk. And that hasn't been my fault. What's the matter, don't you like me any more?"

"It could be because I like you too much, Slim. Maybe it was because I knew that the next time we had a talk I'd probably get up courage enough to ask you and that maybe you'd say no. Maybe because—."

"Maybe—maybe—probably—maybe because—! What kind of talk is that?" she cried. "You're worse than a bogged cow floundering in a mudhole. See here, Bill Marion, if you have something to ask me, why, get about it! You hear? Right now, without any more dodging and side-stepping and mumbling around!"

"All right," gulped Bill. "I'll ask it. Will you?"

"Will I—what?"

"Marry me."

The smile she gave him made Bill's head whirl faster than the windmill was turning. "I was hoping," she said, "for a little more deft and sentimental approach. But, you've asked a question and here is your answer. Iwill!"

She swung her pony in close beside the dun and lifted her face, her eyes moist and shining. "Now, Bill darling, ask me again, real nice. So I can save my self respect, so folks won't be able to say that I hazed you into a corner and roped you down."

Reaching for her, Bill said, "Slim, you always were a little devil."

THE END

THE TEXAS TERROR

★ **By HENRY S. BORDEN** ★

THIS is the story of Tom Smith of Texas. It is a true story, and Tom Smith is a true character who lived and died in Texas during the last days of the Old West. He was not spectacular, and he did not get into the headlines as Bill Hickok and Bat Masterson did, but if there was fighting in his neighborhood he usually had a hand in it. Yet he was no brawler and certainly had none of the lead-throwing characteristics of the typical "bad man." Generally he was on the side of the law, though on one occasion he traveled a thousand miles to help "rub out" seventy rustlers and their friends, including the mayor of a town, a sheriff, and three county commissioners!

Smith was born in Williamson County, Texas, shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War. He grew up in that wild and unfettered West that bred rough, tough, self-confident men. All his

formal education consisted of the information and experience he could gain in the rural elementary grade school. McGuffey's Reader was the only textbook he knew, and from it he learned by heart the stirring "Charge of the Light Brigade" and "Lochinvar."

Tom Smith's real education, however, was not handed out by an instructor or learned from a reader. It was in that outdoor school of life which keeps open session twelve months in the year. He learned to hunt, fish, ride, and throw a rope. He could plow a straight furrow. From a distance of thirty yards he could, within two seconds, throw five bullets into a space no larger than his head. Life in the open made him strong and vigorous. Those were the days of the trail drives and, like most of his young associates, he had tasted the dust of a herd for hundreds of miles while prodding laggards to a market. To wrestle through blizzards, ride out stampedes, swim swollen rivers, was a part of the day's work.

Texas in those days was a hot-bed of gun battles and clan wars. Hundreds of criminals wanted for robberies and murders committed in their home states, had come to the brush country to escape punishment. Within a hundred miles of Williamson County there were scores of outlaw gangs and hard characters who would rather fight than eat. Among them were Sam Bass, Joel Collins, Ben Thompson, King Fisher, the feuding Suttons and Taylors, and John Wesley Hardin, to mention only a few.

Under such conditions it was a compliment to Tom Smith's gameness that, at an early age, he was chosen marshal of one after another of the wild little towns to which the outlaws of the brush country flocked for excitement. One of the first towns in which he worked was Taylor in Williamson County, and an incident which occurred there gives us our first inkling of Tom Smith's character.

A saloon which was one of the worst centers in Taylor was run by a notorious bad character, Sanderson. Smith dropped in on Sanderson, and in a quiet, casual voice explained that he was the new marshal and wanted law and order maintained. Sanderson, irritated by Smith's calm and assured manner, flew into a rage. He told him to get out. If he remained it was to be at his own risk. The level-headed marshal looked coolly about the saloon from one hard face to another and came back to Sanderson. He was leaving now, he explained, and would not be back—unless there was trouble.

In a few days he was back to inquire into a complaint of a cowboy who had been drugged and robbed. As he saw him entering the door, Sanderson reached for his gun, but Smith was too swift and too accurate for him. His pistol still smoking, he issued an edict to the startled bar loungers.

"This saloon is closed and won't reopen. Better get out of town, boys." In this cool, peremptory manner Smith carried out his duty and cleaned out a hornet's nest in Taylor.

This seemed to be the formula wherever Smith went. He saw his duty clearly and never provoked a gun fight. To each of his adversaries he gave fair warning, but those who continued to flaunt the law were stopped.

The most famous event that men remember when the name of Tom Smith is mentioned occurred in January, 1884. At that time he was sheriff of Williamson County. The action involved the notorious gunman, Ben Thompson.

In Austin, the cattlemen of Texas held a convention. After much conferring and debate they adjourned, but about forty of them remained to have a banquet on the evening of January 10th. Among these men were many of the famous trail drivers, including Shanghai Pierre, John Blocher, Ike Pryor, and Seth Mabry. In the midst of the festivities Ben Thompson appeared, gun in hand, and began to shoot the plates from the table.

So great was the fear of Thompson that he was not arrested for this. The next morning, however, the editor of the Austin "Statesman" and the editor of the Georgetown "Sun" wrote sharp criticism of both Thompson and the police. Thompson appeared at the office of the "Statesman" and, after threatening to shoot the editor, calmly and thoroughly wrecked the printing presses. He also wrote to the editor of the "Sun" and said that in a day or two he would be up to settle the matter. The editor called Tom Smith and asked for his aid. Smith was equal to the task.

Tom Smith did not bother with any heroics. He called on a dozen merchants whose places of business were round the town square and suggested they bring their rifles downtown and put them back of their counters. Most of them had been soldiers in the Confederate Army, and the rest had served with the Union forces. They agreed very promptly. Smith sent a message to Thompson. The telegram read:

Can promise you a warm welcome from our most prominent citizens. It will be more convenient for us if you ship a coffin here with instructions as to your burial.

Ben Thompson read the message and changed his mind.

From this time on our record of Smith's activities is hazy. He always seemed to show up at the seat of trouble and then drift away to the range. We do know that he participated in that ill-fated raid on the cattle rustlers in Wyoming. Before he could be brought to trial for his part in that slaughter, he was killed in the Indian territory by an outlaw whom he was arresting.

For Best Detective Fiction
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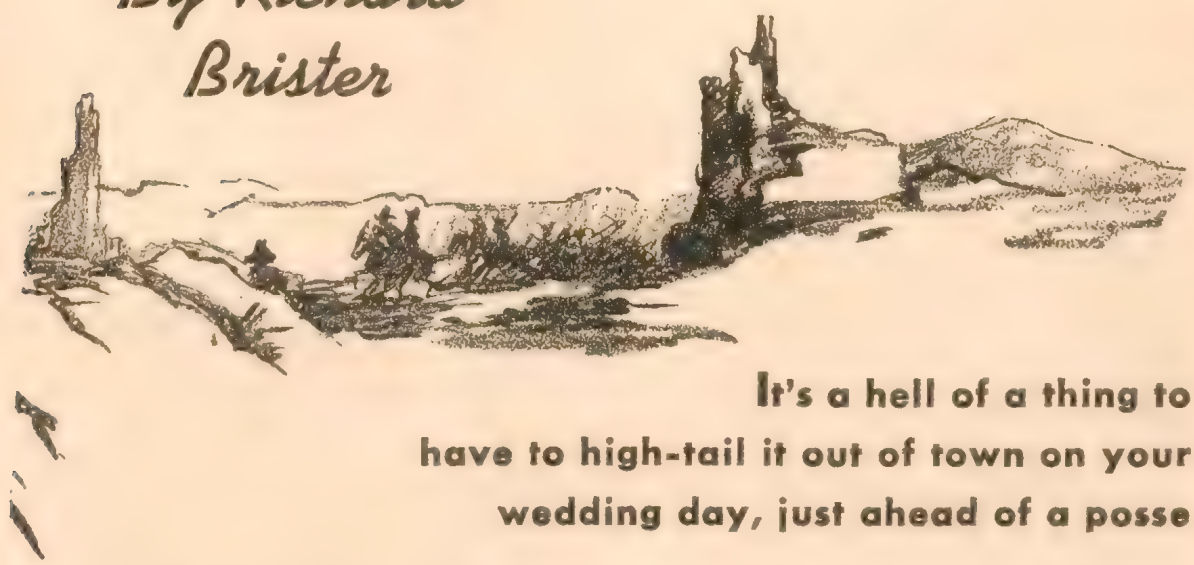
A Rope

He whirled the horse into the tiny draw . . .

for the Bridegroom

By Richard Brister



It's a hell of a thing to have to high-tail it out of town on your wedding day, just ahead of a posse

THE minute he rounded the twist in the trail and saw the foreboding, glass-smooth cliff face in which the box canyon ended, he gave up all hope of eluding the posse.

He could hear the threatening clop-clop of hoofbeats a scant half mile behind him, and even the paper-thin echo of exultant, blood-thirsty voices, as the eager pursuit closed in on him.

He thrust back the panicky sob that constricted his dust-clogged throat and slid to the ground. Damn them. Oh, damn them! He hadn't killed Sig Monay. But try and convince those kill-crazy galoots in Sheriff Buck Dinning's posse!

He placed a clammy hand to his sweat-streaming throat and imagined the rasping drag of a lynch rope across it.

The thought shook his whole lithe frame in convulsive shudders. His panic mounted, as the hullabaloo behind him swept closer. Another few seconds was all, he knew. If there was any way possible to escape from this trap he had ridden into, he'd better soon find it, and make the most of it.

His wide gray eyes swept the naked stone walls that formed an insurmountable barrier on three sides of him. A spider couldn't climb out of this spot, he knew with a heart-sickening thrust of frustration. Fat chance for a human! It looked like the Fates had it in for Jim Devers for fair, and if he knew any good prayers, he'd reached a time for them.

The law was a primitive affair in this part of Wyoming. A sheriff's posse would string up a man as quick as spit on him, if they figured they'd made no mistake, if they were sure they'd grabbed the right party. Quick justice saved the state money, starved out the shyster lawyers, and had a tendency to scare the sin out of all prospective law

breakers.

Oh, they'd string him up quick as a horse can wink, Jim thought, fighting hard against panic. He'd killed Sig Monay. That was all they knew, all they cared to know, and a mule's kick couldn't budge their stubborn convictions, not with that mob mood on them.

He *hadn't* killed Sig, though. He'd have to admit it sure looked like he had. But Lord, would a man less than an hour away from his wedding with the prettiest little girl in the county be in a likely state of mind to do murder?

It was only the craziest kind of a fluke that had taken him into Sig Monay's store today, in the first place. He'd been up at the *One More* bar, having a couple rounds with the boys, sort of a final bachelor fling before stepping into a married man's harness, about nine this morning.

One drink, as they will at such times, had led to quite a few others, and he'd been a bit bleary when he'd finally glanced at his watch and seen it was time to get to the church, where Jenny and her ma and the guests would be waiting.

He'd gone to the wall peg for his fancy new Stetson, which he'd borrowed especially for the occasion. The hat was missing.

Bill Petrie said, "Reckon that top piece was just too tempting for some quick-fingered hombre, Jim. It's a durn shame. And you fixin' t' get married in it."

Jim swore vengefully and watched hopefully as the others lifted their hats from the wall pegs. "One thing's certain. I got to wear some kind of a hat t' this weddin'. My new mother-in-law's runnin' the whole show accordin' to the strict city notions she was raised to back east. If I tried to drive off from the church without no hat on, Ma Beldon'd brain me." He grabbed Bill Petrie's Stetson. "Here, Bill, could be you're elected to help complete the groom's wardrobe."

But Bill had a head like a toy balloon. His outsized hat would have slid down to Jim's chin, if his ears hadn't stopped it.

As for the others he might have borrowed, they all were either too worn to suit such a festive occasion, or the wrong size, also.

Bill Petrie scratched his thick brown thatch and wagged his head slowly. "Looks like, Jim," he said slowly, "you'll have to break that two-year tradition of your'n an' pay a quick visit t' Sig Monay's. It's right down church ways, an'—"

"No!" Jim snapped the word at him, and in that instant was sobered completely.

JIM DEVERS had not set foot inside Sig Monay's dry goods store for two solid years, not since the tragic, long-ago day when his kid brother, Alf, had quarrelled drunkenly with the middle-aged store owner on the main street of Sunup.

Jim never did learn how the quarrel had flared to such an intensity of emotion. All he did know—and all that counted, really—was the fact that a disput over a defective pair of boots Sig had sold Alf resulted in gunplay between the two hot-tempered men, gunplay that left Alf stone-dead in the dusty street, while Sig Monay stood unscathed, holding a hot-barrelled sixgun above the dead younker.

Maybe it was fair play, as Jim's friends kept insisting. The fact that stuck closest to Jim's numbed brain was that Alf was gone, the last family Jim had in this world, since the two had been orphans. And he never forgot that Alf had been drunk, during the battle, while the older, more-experi-

enced store owner had gone into the ruckus cold sober.

From that day, Jim never trusted himself in Sig Monay's presence. If he passed the man on the streets of Sunup, he turned his back on him. If Sig Monay entered the *One More* for a hand of cards or a drink at the bar, while Jim was present, Jim excused himself and abruptly departed.

If he needed something from Monay's store—and that happened often, since Monay had the only dry goods store in Sunup—he sent a friend to the store to make his purchase.

Maybe that was the answer now, he thought bleakly, and glanced at Bill Petrie. "That's about my last hope, I reckon." He pulled some crisp new bills from his trouser pocket honeymoon money. "Here, Bill, you slide up to Sig's and buy a hat for me. And hurry. Time's wastin'."

Bill Petrie wagged his huge head slowly. "No good, Jim. Unless you know what size'll fit you," he added hopefully.

Jim scowled. "Don't buy a hat more'n once in five years. How should I?" He looked at the others. "Any of you fellas know your head size?"

Nobody seemed to. There was a pondering silence as the group considered the problem. Bill Petrie said finally, "Look, it's your weddin' day, Jim. The sweetest little girl in the hull state is up there at the church right this minute, most like', bitin' her lips an' wonderin' what's keepin' her waitin'. I been sweet on Jen Benson a good whiles myself, but you an' me never had no meanness about it. For her sake, forget your grudge on Sig, just this once. This just ain't no time in your life t' be grudge-holdin'. Right fellas?"

Bill looked his question at the circle of faces. The men nodded approval of what he'd been saying.

"Go ahead, Jim," wiry Ed Daly chimed in. "Get up the street and buy you that Stetson. You'll never get a proper fit, without you go in there your own self. Don't keep the girl waitin'."

THE upshot was, of course, that he'd gone, after dispatching the others to the church to explain to poor Jen and to Mrs. Benson how come he was turning up late to take part in his own wedding.

Bill Petrie, at the last, had forced his own gunbelt on Jim, who had left his off, naturally, as befitting a principal in a splicing. "Wouldn't want to see you walk in on Sig so sudden-like an' without no weapons," he'd said shrewdly. "Sig's kind of queer. Surprise of seein' you walk in, after two solid years, just might make him gun-proddy. A couple of business-like lookin' Colts on your hips'll hold his fire better'n anything else, I reckon."

Jim had seen the hard sense underlying the words, and had felt a warm spot inside him for the man who spoke them. You'd have to look pretty far to find another man with the understanding and heart of Bill Petrie. Jim had beat him out in the friendly race for Jen Benson's affection, but Bill knew how to lose the game without losing his temper.

Jim thanked him profusely as he strapped Bill's guns on. Then he had walked fast up the street toward Sig Monay's place.

Sunup's main drag was completely deserted, except for a few romping hound dogs, and here and there a stray chicken, pecking for refuse along the litter-strewn gutter.

The church, which was on the far end of town, had drawn the townsfolk to it like flies to sugar, this morning. Weddings so seldom occurred in Sunup that the town had turned out almost *en*

masse to witness the splicing by Preacher Dinwoodie.

Even the business men closed their shops and attended. But Sig Monay's place, at least, was still open. Sig wouldn't dare have the gall to show up at Jim Devers' wedding!

Sig's store occupied a large rectangular frame building, fashioned crudely of unpainted pine boards. It was a sturdy structure enough, and roomy, which suited Sig's purpose. It had no show window, having been originally built as a storehouse. The front walls were plastered with faded handbills of every description.

Jim walked boldly down the deserted street on the opposite side from the Monay building. He hesitated a moment, steeling himself to the scene with Sig that was coming.

Suddenly the ghost-town stillness that pervaded the main drag was pierced by the vicious crackle of pistol fire. The report brought Jim's head up sharply. There came another muffled explosion. He saw that the sound was coming from inside Sig's place.

Impulse thrust his numbed legs into motion. He crossed the dusty street in four running strides, swung Sig's door open quick, and bolted inside.

He could not adjust himself to the darkness at once. For a moment he stood there, foolishly blinking, just inside the open door.

A slight dragging sound, as of a scuffing boot heel, turned him. He never saw the man who had crept up close to him from behind a high showcase.

Something steel-hard came plummeting down atop his bare head. He had a fleeting awareness that it was a gun butt that struck him. Then weird dancing stars traced a crazyquilt pattern on a black curtain before him. He fell, what seemed a measureless distance. The floor rushed up crazily and bumped his forehead.

And still his stubborn brain refused to blank out completely. He could not drift away to the state of unconsciousness his shattered nerves begged for.

Vaguely, he was aware of the shadowy outline of a man kneeling beside him. He felt one of the guns being drawn from his holsters. The man worked on it a moment. Jim felt the fingers of his right hand being forced around the weapon. Then, abruptly, the hulking shadow was gone.

HE LAY in darkness. In a while, with a supreme effort, he forced himself to a sitting position. His spinning brain clouded over. A wave of nausea gripped him and he thrust both hands to the floorboards beside him, fighting to clear his head.

Five minutes of that. Five minutes fighting the impulse to let go, to submerge, to give way before the blinding pulse-throbbing pain that assailed him. But he won his battle at last.

And clear-headed now, he did some straight thinking. This was, of course, a classical frame-up. Someone, for some unknown reason, had wanted either himself, Jim Devers, or perhaps Sig Monay, out of the way. The schemer had worked swiftly, skillfully, and his plan had apparently worked out perfectly so far.

Jim came erect unsteadily and walked toward the back of the store, near the change counter. What he found there on the floor made him retch and roil over inside a little, but it hardly surprised him.

Sig Monay lay face down in back of the cash register. There were two bloody holes in his back and a tiny pool of blood was rapidly forming around him.

He had apparently been shot in the

back, without warning. The killer had then hidden himself and had lain in wait for Jim's impulsive rush through the street door. And so, without the slightest trouble, had conked him out with the swinging butt of a heavy six shooter.

Jim's racing mind could now fit more of the pieces into the puzzle. The killer had planned much further ahead than that. It was the killer who'd lifted Jim's hat, during the bachelor party at the *One More*.

The wall peg he'd left the hat on had been near the window, come to think of it. How easy, then, for the killer to wait his moment, outside the window, and grab the hat when the group inside had all their eyes focused elsewhere.

The killer was a man of imagination, it appeared, also. A man who could know that Jim would fail to find the spare Stetson he needed, among his party of well-wishing friends, who could know Jim's hand would be finally forced to enter the store of Sig Monay, the man he desperately hated, after a two-year boycott of Sig's place.

"Lord," Jim thought weirdly, "what a perfect frame-up! He knocks me cold, sticks the gun I borrowed from Bill in my fist, after first shoving a couple of burnt cartridges in it. That's how he means 'em t' find me! And who'd ever figure anyone else but me did for Sig? 'Course, the bump on the head might start folks asking questions, and they'd wonder at my being unconscious, but—"

And then he saw the huge flatiron which had been placed conveniently on the floor beside the place where the killer had clubbed him.

"So that's his answer!" Jim scowled at the iron. "Make folks think that iron fell off that top shielf and knocked me pin-wheelin'. Smart hombre. He didn't overlook a durn thing. He meant to slip a noose 'round my neck, plumb certain!"

BUT why? Why? What possible motive could be behind such a frame-up? Of course, the killer might not have had a thing against Jim Devers. He might have wanted Sig Monay out of the way, for some personal reason, and had chosen Jim for the most likely person to frame for the murder. Because every one in Sunup knew of the bad blood between Jim and the man who had killed his younger brother.

"Anyways," Jim thought grimly, "this ain't no place for me." It wouldn't do to have someone walk in, right now, and find him in the room with the dead man. He thought a moment, then walked out unsteadily and strode down the plank boardwalk to the *One More*. There was just one barkeep on duty, the same man who had served Jim and his friends at the bachelor party.

"Hey!" The man blinked curiously at him. "Ain't you got t' that splicin' *yet?* What's the trouble, Jim? You look like you been in a ruckus. Your new suit's all dirty."

It was a reminder to Jim that he had to work fast. "Look," he said to the man. "I aim to ask you one question. I want a straight answer. And a quick one."

The man looked nervous. Some unwonted hardness in Jim's tone had done it. "Fire away."

"You were facin' that wall peg, while the rest of us had our backs to it, standin' here drinkin'. You had the best chance t' see what become of that Stetson. If you know anything about where that hat went, I want to know it. It's important."

"Why, shucks, Jim," the man grinned toothily at him. "That's wa'n't nothin'. Jest a kind of a joke

that me an' Bill Petrie rigged up between us."

"*What?* Bill Petrie?"

"That's right. Bill come in early this mornin' an' allowed as how it was a durn shame, you an' Sig Monay still hatin' each other's innards all this while, over that showdown between Sig an' Alf. Bill figgered this was the best time to patch things up between you, this bein' your weddin' day, and you bein' in a proper mood fer truce-makin'. So he give me five dollars t' swipe your hat, while none of you fellers was watchin', an' hide it in here in back o' the bar. By your needin' t' get another one, he figured it'd force your hand into seein' Monay. The way he said, Monay'd prob'ly unbend a little and wish you luck on your weddin', and the ice'd break up between you." The bar man peered curiously at him. "That's how it *did* work out, ain't it?"

JIM didn't hear him. Bill Petrie! Why, Bill had been a friend of Jim's for years, and a good friend of Alf's, when the kid was living. Bill wouldn't be the one to rig up a frame on him. It was like Bill, too, rigging up a crazy scheme like that to patch matters between Jim and Sig Monay. Then the real killer had not swiped the hat after all. He had probably been in the bar room this morning, seen how the wind was blowing, and had taken swift advantage of a perfect set-up to kill Sig and frame Jim Devers for it.

It just couldn't be Bill, Jim reasoned. Why, Bill was always going out of his way to do favors for Jim, lending him money, talking him up to Jen when they were both sparking her, running small errands at Sig's store for him. Bill had been just as obliging to Alf when the kid had been living. He'd been with Alf just before the tragic battle with Sig, and had lent his sixguns to the younger, as he had lent them to Jim today.

He was the best friend a man could want, was Bill Petrie, always bobbing up out of nowhere when a helping hand was wanted, and as that fleeting thought crossed Jim's numbed brain, something happened to prove it. The batwings of the *One More* hinged inward and who strode in but the same Bill Petrie.

"Holy sufferin' catfish, Jim! Get a move on. Folks are runnin' a fever down to the church. An' you standin' here drinkin'! Did you get that hat you were goin' after?"

"No," Jim sighed wearily. "I got a crack on the head instead." Swiftly, briefly, he outlined what had happened.

Bill Petrie's wide, good-natured face looked stricken. "And to think," he muttered disgustedly, "I started you into that trap with that fool stunt of stealin' your topper." He waved at the bar man. "I s'pose he's already told you."

"I know you meant well," Jim sighed grimly.

"But dammit all, you're in a spot, Jim. The frame-up's still perfect. Everybody knows, down there at the church, that you were up at Sig's. That's what we told 'em to explain you bein' late. They've all been drinkin' some—I mean the men have—and they'll jump to conclusions, sudden, when they hear what's happened. They'll be out for your blood, sure as shootin'. I can just hear the sheriff, when the news about Sig gets to him. 'A man's got to have the lobo strain in him,' he'll say, 't' shoot down a man in cold blood afore reportin' to church for his own weddin'.' He'll have a special posse got up quick as you can bat an eye, Jim. And they'll be totin' a hang-noose. You know how Buck Dinning's posses work, when they figure they got

a man dead to rights on a killin'!"

Jim fingered his Adam's apple uneasily and shifted his feet. "But what can I do? Dammit all, Bill, I didn't kill—"

"Ride, Jim. Ride. Go in hiding a couple of days, till they cool down a little. Let 'em get some of that likker out of their systems, before they lay a hand on you. You know a drunk mob'll slap a rope over a cottonwood branch and dance a man on the end of a hang rope as quick as bet two bits on a straight flush in poker."

There was a lot of hard sense in what Bill was saying. Jim's horse was tied at the hitch rack outside. He was not dressed for riding, but he took only a few fleeting seconds to reach a decision. "I want to thank you, Bill. It's the only sensible way, I reckon. I'll light out for the Baldies."

"You do that, Jim. I'll try to talk some shade of sense into them, back here. And I'll see what I can scare up about who really pulled off that killin'. Now get a move on, old son. Time's awastin'. It ain't healthy for you."

AND so Jim had forked leather, and spurred Rusty up the winding gravelly trail toward the distant Baldies. And it hadn't taken Sheriff Buck Dinning more than half an hour to organize his kill-crazed posse and light out after the fugitive bridegroom.

Slowly, inexorably, the posse had closed up tighter and tighter on Jim's backtrail. Finally, when they were scarcely more than a mile behind, drawing steadily closer, Jim had spurred Rusty into what looked like an open dry wash, in the faint hope of tricking the posse.

But the dry wash had become by swift turns a deep gully, then a deeper ravine, and finally a steep-walled canyon, with a fast mountain stream cutting crookedly along the narrow floor of it.

And now, a vindictive Fate had turned it into a box canyon, a trap which apparently contained no possible outlet. The posse would be rounding that final bend in a matter of seconds, hooting and raising a blood-thirsty hullabaloo at the sight of their quarry.

There'd be quick justice, in the form of a hemp necktie for Jim. And a fat chance he'd have to prove he hadn't killed Sig Monay, out in this Godforsaken gash in the Baldies, ten full miles from the scene of the killing.

Frantically, he searched every bit of the scene for some small sign of an exit. Only the bare scale-proof walls met his dazed vision. His glazed eyes fell on the swift gurgling water that knifed along the floor of the canyon. At the box end, the water went directly under the dead end wall, in a subterranean current. The stream had a tricky way of sliding underground, cutting a path through hard rock at regular intervals along the floor of the canyon.

Jim stared hard at the place where the stream appeared, at the base of the sheer cliff that had stopped him, and so neatly trapped him. If a man were to slide into the stream and swim underwater, straight in under the cliff face, there was just a faint chance that he'd come to a spot inside where the stone didn't come down to meet the water's swift-gurgling surface. If he could find head room, somewhere inside there, he'd have that posse guessing for fair. They'd naturally figure he'd either gone downstream, riding that fast down-hill current, or—and this thought made his eyes flash with quick hope, they'd figure he'd never even ridden into this canyon, that he'd given his horse a slap on the rump at the mouth of the cut, sending the horse in here to false-trail them, while he went into hiding

afoot, out there at the entrance.

Jim was a human eel, in the water. This was his only hope, and he was quick to grasp at it. He dove into the ice-cold water. A great shudder convulsed him as the shock of its coldness raced through him. He took a deep breath of air, ducked under the fast current, and grasping the rubble of smooth stones underneath, pulled himself as fast as he could go into that small aperture through which the stream spouted.

HE WORKED with a panicky concentration of effort, and from time to time he lifted his head experimentally to the water's surface, seeking head room, a space to accommodate a man's breathing. The roof of the tiny stone tube which the water had cut for its passage always met his head, and he knew mounting panic.

Suppose he never found head room. He was feeling a tightness, a growing constriction within his tortured lungs now. He let out a thin trickle of air and the tightness lessened. But just for a moment. Then it was back again, more painful than ever. If he didn't soon get a breath of air, he would start trying to draw breath underwater. And that would be the beginning of drowning.

He lifted his head once again, his terror mounting. Again he struck solid rock. But it seemed to him, this time, that there was a fractional inch or so of space between the top rock and the water's surface.

He rolled over swiftly onto his back, wedged his bootheels down hard against two large rocks, and thrust his greedy nose up toward the tiny air space he'd discovered.

He managed to draw one strangling breath, but there was a choking mixture of cold mountain water with it. He refused to choke, knowing the danger of it. The gasping breath had relieved him a little. He ducked under again, and drove himself further into the face of the cliff, along this tiny, constricting channel.

A half minute later he lifted his blue, pain-twisted face completely above the water's cold surface, and gazed in choking, grateful wonderment at the huge, stalactite-hung cavern into which he had blundered!

Light filtered into this damp, eerie chamber through a slit in the solid stone that formed the misshapen walls and the high ceiling. Jim lay for a long time gasping on a slimy slab of stone alongside of the underground stream. After a while he was breathing almost normally again. He became more aware of his weird surroundings, on this grandiose trick of nature that had saved his life for him.

The gurgling of the stream made a hollow soft echo against the high walls of this underground chamber. Soon he became aware of other sounds, drifting in through that slit in the wall high above him through which the light filtered in murky patterns. He heard the drum of horses' hooves against solid stone, heard the shouts of many voices, and knew at once that from this vantage point he could eavesdrop on the men of the posse.

HOW neatly Mother Nature had arranged matters for him. The men's voices were contained in that box canyon outside there as effectively as by an architect's dream theatre designed for acoustical perfection. The voices ricocheted off the walls, and were magnified in so doing, and so the sounds drifted with clarion clearness down through that slit above, and thence into Jim's cavern.

He could hear the gravelly growl of

Sheriff Buck Dinning. "That's his horse, sure enough. He's gotta be in this box canyon somewheres. Unless —" the voice paused "—unless he took to the stream an' floated down underground with it."

And then a more familiar voice, the voice of Bill Petrie, cutting in nervously, "One thing's for sure, he didn't go upstream. No man alive could buck that kind of current."

"You ask me," said the sheriff, "he never even come up this canyon. He sent his cayuse in here to lead us a goose chase, whilst he was cuttin' into that stand of close scrub pine down there at the fork. Come on, boys, let's hightail back thataways and see if we can cut his sign back there."

They were off in a clatter of thucking hoofbeats, and for the first time since the debate had begun, Jim breathed easily. He was puzzled a bit about Bill Petrie's presence with the posse, but not too much, all things considered. Bill was along to help, to see fair play, and to put in a word for his friend when it would do the most good, Jim figured. It would be a sorry world indeed, he scolded himself, when he got so low as to distrust the motives of a man who'd done as much for him as big, good-natured Bill Petrie.

He lay there, trying to map his next move while he waited for the posse to fade safely away from his place of concealment. Thoughts of Jen, waiting vainly at the church this morning, and of Mrs. Benson, that whole crowd waiting there, kept forcing their way into his benumbed head. He couldn't drive such thoughts from him.

A fine wedding day this was. Four short hours ago he had been on the top of the world, just about the happiest young cowpoke in all of Sunup. And now look at him, miserable and cold and forsaken, with a posse scouring the country for him, a hangnoose hanging over his head if he made one false move, and only one friend in the world he could count on. Bill Petrie.

He didn't even have a horse out there now. The posse must certainly have taken Rusty. He knew the feeling of utter despair that such a state means to a thoroughgoing cowboy, and he swore vengefully under his breath at the skulking sidewinder who had plummeted him into all this difficulty.

One thing he did know. He had to clear his name, somehow, and promptly. Nobody could have wanted to kill him, Jim Devers, but possibly some one had wanted to do away with Sig Monay. Maybe—and the thought made Jim lick his wet lips with relish—maybe there was something among Sig's effects, or on his store records, which would point to the guilty party.

Jim's job was to get into town, somehow, without being noticed, and go through Sig's stuff till he found something. He'd have to clear his own name. No use just sitting back and waiting for Bill Petrie to scare something up in his favor.

If you wanted a job done right in this world, you had to do it your own self, and that was gospel.

WHEN the shaft of light from that slit overhead started fading a bit, as nightfall threatened, Jim finally got up his nerve for another trip through that lung-bursting tunnel. Going out was much simpler than coming in had been, though. He simply held himself under and allowed the swift current to drag him downstream.

He stepped out onto the floor of the canyon, removed his boots and poured water from them, shook his clothes as dry as he could, dog fashion. Then he put on his boots and set out purposefully afoot on the ten-mile trek to

Sunup.

If he was lucky, he figured, he ought to pull into town well before dawn. He'd be there just the right time to slip into town unobserved—for the posse had probably spread it around that he'd drowned trying to escape in that stream underground, and he was therefore a 'dead man'—and he could raid old Sig Monay's store with a minimum of danger.

He was still wearing the belt and guns Bill Petrie had loaned him. He tossed one gun away, wanting to travel light as could be, for his long tour of walking, but he hung onto the other. Luckily, the cartridges in Bill's belt were well greased. They'd probably be just as good as ever, despite their ducking.

Jim reached the outskirts of Sunup around three in the morning. His high-heeled boots had worn his feet to a welter of aches and raw blisters, and he was limping badly. But much as he could, he ignored the discomfort. He had a job to do, an important job, and he skirted ghostlike through a dozen back alleys, till he came at last to the store which had belonged to Sig Monay.

He approached the back door cautiously, wondering how he was going to break in without creating a noise that would stir up the sleepers in the neighboring buildings. Then he suddenly froze where he stood. A faint flicker of light shone briefly, inside the long rectangular building. It was just for an instant, the sort of light a match makes when it flares up and then blanks out in an instant. But what struck Jim was that he had noticed that flare-up through the doorway.

That back door was already open. Someone had got here before him, and was already going through old Sig's papers!

The thought sent a prickle of tense excitement drumming lightly along his backbone. Because that could mean only one thing, as Jim saw it. That man in there must be the real killer. The man had been worried about some skullduggery he'd been up to in cahoots with Sig, or perhaps Sig had had something on him. And now, having put Sig out of his way, he was trying to destroy any evidence he might have overlooked at the time of the murder, when he'd been so hurried.

Jim fingered the cold butt of the single gun that remained in his holsters and stepped carefully forward. He stopped thoughtfully, and carefully removed his boots from his swollen feet.

It occurred to him briefly that that might be Bill Petrie in there, trying to find something that would clear him, Jim Devers. In that case, such great caution was probably foolish. But at such times, a man doesn't dare take chances. Jim crept on stocking feet to the open door, and peered inside.

FROM this vantage point he could look along the cluttered floor to the left hand wall, against which stood Sig's big wall safe. It was an ancient ineffective contraption, with a key-type lock which could probably be picked by any man with the slightest knowledge of such things, but Sig had always sworn by it.

Jim made out the bulky outlines of a man kneeling on the floor beside the safe. The man kneeled in deep shadow, so it was impossible to identify him. As Jim watched, he took a key out of his pocket, applied it to the lock on the safe, and quite casually swung the creaking door open.

Jim gasped, realizing the implications of what he'd just seen. If this man had the key to Sig's ancient safe, then this man *had* to be the real killer. Nobody else but the killer could have obtained

possession of that key, because Sig always wore it attached to his belt on a stout rawhide thong he had devised for that special purpose.

This man, then, had killed Sig this morning and had ripped the key off his dead body, then had lain in hiding to wait for Jim, and so had skillfully framed Jim for the murder.

That was the only plausible answer, Jim figured. He watched carefully, expecting the man to start taking currency out of Sig's safe now. A match flared up briefly, and though he could not see the man's face in the flare-up of light it afforded, he saw the man's hands dart swiftly among the piled stacks of greenbacks and finally settle around a plain sheet of white paper in the pile.

This the man read hastily, then stuffed it into his vest pocket.

Jim decided he'd seen about all he had to. He slipped cautiously inside the building, and tiptoed toward the stranger, meaning to put a gun in his backbone and take him down to the sheriff, pronto.

Something brushed lightly against his shins. He stumbled slightly, then leaped back with alarm as a large heavy object crashed resoundingly upon the rough floorboards, somewhere to the right of him.

Jim swore. The oldest trick in the world, and yet he'd fallen prey to it. The interloper had strung a bit of string to some heavy object atop the showcase, and then, when Jim brushed it, he had dislodged the object, thus warning the stranger.

And the man was quick to act, once he saw that his little snare had garnered a victim. He sprang up and around from his place at the safe like a startled cat. His big hands were darting to holstered sixguns in the same lightning motion.

THE thunderous report of both of those heavy sixguns crashed resoundingly within the closed room. Jim felt a hot slug bore through his chest, driving him backward. He hit the showcase from which the warning object had fallen, and then dove floorward headlong.

He heard another slug knife through the air, fanning his cheekbone. He had his own gun out now, and he planted a slug where he judged that other had come from.

He had missed, he knew with a sickening hollow sensation inside him. The stranger's guns kept booming angrily at him, spitting lead death in a fiery circle around him. It was a circle that narrowed, that must surely close in to kill him.

He triggered again at the unseen human target. His hammer clicked down on a dead cartridge. Jim swore. That would be the result of his ducking, he realized in panic. And if the others failed to ignite too, he was good as a goner.

He tried another, aiming directly toward the belching muzzle of the intruder's six. There was a groan, then a scream of sharp anguish.

Jim heard the heavy thud of a body striking the floorboards. The man was down then! For safety's sake, Jim crawled around in back of the showcase and waited. A complete minute he waited, and nothing happened.

Then he stood up shakily, holding a hand to the gash in his shoulder where that hot slug had ripped at him. In front of the safe, he stopped, feeling the figure of the fallen intruder against his toes, and struck a match from the waterproof container he carried as part of his smoking equipment.

The man lay face down, quite dead. A pool of blood was fast forming around him. Jim leaned down weakly and

turned him over.

It was Bill Petrie!

Jim's shoulders shook convulsively, and a rasping sob escaped from his constricted throat. He had killed Bill Petrie. He had killed the man who had done his utmost to befriend and to help him, on this the most unhappy day of his life.

It was the final ironic slap in the face from a Fate which just seemed to produce nothing but trouble for him. Jim sat down on the floor alongside of his dead friend and shamelessly blubbered. Let the law come, as it must, he was thinking. What did it matter now? What did anything matter, really? He had killed poor old Bill Petrie.

Sheriff Buck Dinning was one of the first to get to the scene, aroused by the shooting. His lantern jaw slacked plenty when he saw Jim sitting there alongside of a dead Bill Petrie, but he put the cuffs on Jim without any waste motion.

Then came the questions. "How'd it happen? And what was Bill doin' here in the fust place?"

Jim shrugged hopelessly. "Just tryin' to clear me. He—he found a scrap of paper in the safe. It's in his vest pocket. Reckon that was the evidence he was after."

DINNING took out the sheet of paper and held it up to the light from his coal oil lantern. His face worked thoughtfully as he read, and then he said heavily, but without ill feeling, "Sure was what he wanted. The schemin' coyote. This here's Sig's writin', Jim. Got his signature on it, all legal an' proper, an' I reckon it clears you, clean's a whistle."

"Wh—huh?"

"Remember that battle between Sig an' Alf? You would, I reckon, bein' Alf's brother. Petrie lent Alf his own pair of irons, for that little set-to."

"That's right. I rememb—"

"Seems like he pulled a couple of ca'tridges out of 'em, afore he handed 'em over to Alf. That was just a couple seconds afore the ruckus got started. The poor kid didn't think to check on 'em. He didn't have time, and he was too plumb excited. That's how come Sig drilled him so easy. The kid triggered down on empty chambers an' Sig knocked him down afore he got to them live chambers."

Jim's head was spinning. "But why? In the name of all that's human, why would a fellow like Bill—"

"You take that Bill Petrie," said Dinning, "I never did completely trust him. Seemed a mite too obligin', t' suit me. Sig says here that him and Bill and your kid brother was workin' together on a little high-handed rustlin' business, runnin' hot brands down over the border.

"They come a couple close shaves with the law, and the kid got a touch o' buck fever. He was agoin' t' tell you what he'd been up to. So Sig an' Bill rigged up that phony quarrel with him, and killed him, makin' the hull thing look right legal. They had me plumb hornswoggled, and I'm here to admit it."

"Me too," Jim concurred wonderingly. It was crazy, crazy. And he'd thought so blamed much of Bill Petrie. Who could you trust in this world? he was wondering. Then he thought of Jen Benson, who would be his now, after all, and his hard scowl softened a little.

"Next thing," continued the sheriff, "Petrie an' Sig begun to quarrel about money matters, and distrustin' each other. Petrie kept threatenin' t' tell you how the kid really got it from Sig, and that scared Sig right proper. Though, if he'd had any brains, he'd've

known Bill didn't dare crack the whole story clean to you. Still an' all, when a man's scared, he don't think too straight, I don't reckon.

"So Sig sot down and writ it all down here on paper, and locked it up in his safe, just in case, like he says here, should anything happen to him in the near future."

"He—he knew then? That Bill was going to get him, sooner or later?"

"Sure did. But not the smart way Bill had things figgered out to frame you for the killin', young feller. And I'm right sorry for jumpin' to conclusions you done it. I'm apologizin'. Reckon Bill figgered to wipe the slate clean. He knowed if you ever found out what really happened to Alf, you'd never rest till you had a showdown with him."

Jim said shakily, "Look, Sheriff. Will you do me a favor? Will you come along up to Jen Benson's place, right now, so's I can wake that little gal up an' let her hear all this story from your own lips? Her an' her mother?"

The lantern jaw twisted in a broad grin. "Shore will, young feller. Me, I'm still aimin' t' dance at yor weddin'!"

WESTERN ADVENTURE

By GARY LEE HORTON

WHEN young John Bidwell set out from his home one spring morning in 1839 his sole idea was to head for the west. He had never heard of California, and little did he dream that in the not too distant future he would be leading a group of settlers to that far distant spot. After walking to Cincinnati, young John took a river steamer down the Ohio to the Mississippi. He finally reached St. Louis, and for the following year he spent his time working throughout the state of Missouri. While on one of these jobs he met a Frenchman named Roubideaux. The foreigner had just returned from a far western land called California, and his stories of all its wonders did much to arouse the adventurous spirit of young Bidwell. It did not take our youthful friend long to scour the neighborhood organizing a party of men to travel into the western land. Little did John Bidwell dream that he was to be instrumental in the founding of a town. He succeeded in gathering a group of about sixty-five individuals, and with teams of horses, oxen, and mules they set forth in a western direction. Bidwell had maps of the country but as this was one of the first parties to make the overland trip west these maps were not very accurate. Not one of the party really understood just where they were going, and since there were no roads to follow these must have been adventure loving men to undertake such a precarious trip. It was a rare stroke of luck that the group was able to join forces with several Catholic missionaries and a Rocky Mountain guide named Captain Fitzpatrick, and with the help of this party Bidwell and his men reached Sodo Springs, Idaho where the two parties went their separate ways. When John Bidwell and his men finally reached California only fifteen of the original party were left as the rest had either turned back or fallen by the wayside unable to stand the hardships of such a long hard journey. After reaching his destination, Bidwell took a job at Sutter's headquarters on the Sacramento River.

One day when John Bidwell and several friends were chasing a group of horse thieves who frequented the neighborhood from time to time, they passed through a valley which they all thought to be very beautiful. Bidwell was so attracted to this spot that soon after he spent his hard earned savings on the land. Not long after he began to develop his acreage, gold was discovered in California, and men poured into the west from all over to seek their fortunes. Bidwell panned for gold in the Feather Creek which ran through his land. Soon many others joined him in the sifting of the sands of the stream. Soon enterprising Mr. Bidwell opened a bar which he named "Bidwell's Bar," and it became the center of all the activity in that territory.

From "rancher to city father" sums up briefly the career of our young adventurer. Around the bar grew the town which is now called Chico, California. This lovely spot, situated on the Feather River in Butte County, pays tribute to its founder John Bidwell. This man of stalwart spirit who was not afraid to face the uncertainty of the unknown saw out of his endeavors grow a city which is dearly loved by all its inhabitants.

MRS. HELL

By Joe Austell Small

Mrs. Hell ruled this valley with bloody hands, but somehow that didn't make sense when you saw her . . .

IT WOULD be the first woman Shuck Watson had ever killed. Not that he actually meant to kill her himself. But he did aim to hogtie the evil wench and bring her back to the newly-formed court of justice at Wagon Spoke. There, with the waddie's help, old Judge Sam Holt would work up enough incriminating evidence against her to hang the notorious Mrs. Hell by the neck until she was dead.

It wasn't a pleasant job to think about. But ambushing, burning out, and killing old Sump Watson, Shuck's pa, and Cow-lick, his kid brother, wasn't a very pleasant job either—unless Mrs. Hell enjoyed seeing people die. Folks were beginning to say that she did . . .

Dust rose from the big black's shuttling hoofs. The cluttered notes of a chickadee lent to the sunny day a lazy,

Brandishing his weapon, the rider came racing forward to intercept the coach

restful feel. The country was rolling, wild, and lonely. Shuck Watson was following no trail. He would enter Hell Valley unexpectedly. He wanted to make the most of that small advantage. The waddie lifted a blue denim shirt sleeve to his forehead. These early spring days were already hot.

Tall, gangling, slightly freckled, redheaded and always appearing sunscorched, Shuck Watson was normally jovial. Cowboy boots, heavy brush ducking breeches, blue shirt, red polka-dotted neckerchief, and a nearly new Stetson hat completed his wear. A heavy .45 in a greased, cut-away holster hung below the waddie's right hip.

He wasn't quite sure just what happened after that. He did remember hearing a startled "Woof!" and he had seen a razorback boar run under his horse. Some of those old hogs were

half blind. At times, when suddenly frightened, they were liable to run in any direction.

Shuck was sure of one thing though. The big black had shied and wheeled and completely unsaddled one of the best bronc peelers in Texas. It didn't make the waddie angry. He just sat there in the drifting dust, wiping the sand out of his eyes and mouth, chuckling sporadically. They weren't mirthful, those chuckles. But they relieved some of the pent-up emotions that had boiled within him for three weeks now—ever since he had listened to ma tell that story of horror and death.

Shuck Watson cussed the hog then. He shook the sand out of his flaring red hair, and looked around for his horse.

"Most men in this country learn to ride before they are your age," the girl said. She sat her stocky palomino and looked at him with frank amusement.

Shuck Watson's right hand darted down toward the greased, cutaway holster on his hip.

"Take it easy, cowboy!" the girl spoke quickly. "I'm not going to hurt you. Afraid of a woman?"

Shuck looked at the pretty face, found the brown eyes laughing at him. Her attitude caused the waddie to feel a little sheepishly. He sized up the rest of her carefully, too. She was good to look at all right. Her black hair, flashing white teeth, that form—she was the kind of a girl that made a man stutter. And out here in the wilds, she seemed unreal. A man just didn't run upon a beautiful girl out here sixty-five miles from the forks of nowhere!

"You real—or did I get throwed harder'n I thought?" the waddie asked dully.

"I'm real," the girl answered, "and you didn't get thrown hard at all!"

It was like water in the desert, that voice. Her smile was good, too. But the eyes didn't go with that smile and the friendly voice. They were dark and sad and deep. It made a first impression of the girl difficult. Shuck licked his lips. He tried to grin.

"Who are you?" the girl asked then.

"Shuck Watson," the waddie said without thinking. The sudden turn of events had addled his brain.

The girl's lips tightened. "Any kin to a man named Sump Watson?" she asked.

The waddie was immediately on guard. "What if I am?"

THE girl's friendly expression faded like a lingering puff of dry-range mist hit by a ray of hot sunshine. Slim, brown hands reached down toward a battered saddle scabbard. They came up with a short carbine.

"Your hip gun," the girl commanded, her voice hard, cutting. "Hand it to me, butt first. No tricks now. My finger's itchy."

For a moment Shuck did not move. He sat staring at the girl, his mind racing. Those eyes matched the face now—hard, dark and deep. That's what had been wrong with them before. They were used to being hard. They didn't match a friendly expression.

Shuck handed over his gun without an argument. The girl rode over to his horse then and took the waddie's Winchester. The big Morgan shied and stamped his front feet nervously.

"Now get on your horse and ride!" the girl commanded.

As Shuck climbed into his saddle, the girl added, "Don't come back here—ever! If you do, you'll die!"

"You've got me gagged now," the waddie said slowly, meaningly. His lips tightened. A hard, cold glint crept into the dark blue of his eyes. "But I've got a hunch we'll meet again some

day—Mrs. Hell!"

The waddie spun his big black around then and rode away.

THE harsh, strident notes of a scolding jay echoed throughout the tiny, deep-cut draw. The sun was now a smear of dull yellow on the western horizon. The air was oppressive, hollow. A monotonous, intermittent trip-hammer banging came from the bole of an old dead mesquite which sagged out over a lip of the draw.

Shuck Watson rose from his squatted position beside a cool boulder. The big Morgan raised his head sharply, looked at the waddie. Saddle leather creaked as the horse flexed powerful muscles.

"'Bout time we rode down and got our tails shot off!" Shuck commented dryly, reaching for the grounded reins. "Nobody but an unarmed damned fool would ride into that valley after the gal's spread the alarm. Might as well rode in shootin' as to a'made th' blunder of tellin' her my name! Seems like sometimes my fool brain don't work good when I need it in a hurry. Gal was kinda purty, too, at first . . ."

Shuck liked to talk to the big Morgan that way. The horse was intelligent. He couldn't understand, of course, but the spirited animal shook his head up and down until the bits rattled. It looked like he understood. Anyhow, it always made the waddie smile. It made him feel better inside too.

Shuck mounted and rode leisurely up to a ledge that overlooked Hell Valley. The knuckles on his right hand shone white as he reined in behind a shallow clump of buckbrush. He wasn't pulling back on the narrow strips, just squeezing them tightly, loosening his hold and gripping them again. The big Morgan knew that something was in the making. He kept swinging his stern, his heels chopping.

The young rider placed a weather-browned hand on the saddle biscuit, tip-toed in his stirrups and urged the horse forward. Once inside the sparce growth, he could see over the swaying bushtops and into the valley. He studied the shallow, hill-fringed bowl intently. It was his first glimpse of Hell Valley—the place they were beginning to call "Nesters' Graveyard."

Just eight short weeks ago old Sump Watson, Ma Watson and Cowlick, Shuck's eighteen-year-old brother, had rolled into that valley. They hadn't known about its grisly squatter reputation then. Old Sump had pitched camp to rest up a week or so before going on West. A couple of nights later they had awakened to find their wagon on fire, their supplies burning.

Old Sump and Cowlick had fought back. They had been shot. Ma Watson remained a prisoner in the bushwhacker's hands for two weeks. She was permitted to ride out of the valley on a bony mare then. She had stopped by the two shallow graves near Sand Creek and cried over the little mesquite crosses.

Ma had told Shuck where the graves were. She said they were two hundred yards up the creek from a place the Lonely Coyote drygulchers called Wolf Head Bluff. She had told him other things he'd need to know too, described the ranch and valley as well as she could.

It had taken Ma two weeks to get in touch with Shuck, another week for him to reach Wagon Spoke. And he had spent three weeks finding out all he could about Hell Valley. He had promised Ma that he'd try to get up a posse to ride into the valley. But there was no law in Wagon Spoke with the exception of old Judge Sam Holt. The judge was old and he had only recently

moved in. But he was honest. He wanted to bring some form of law to the country.

Still, that didn't settle the Hell Valley question. Right-thinking, straight-shooting men were needed to ride in and bring that nesters' death trap to justice. But it was hard to find men who would fight a woman . . .

SHUCK WATSON found out little enough about Hell Valley. Ever since old Thunderhead Templeton had moved in there twelve years ago and declared it his own little kingdom, folks had been afraid to prowl Hell Valley. Outsiders had named it, inspired by some of the stories that came out of old Templeton's kingdom. And the old man, with a seeming relish for grimness, had accepted the name as official. Thunderhead ruled his help with an iron hand. He would tolerate no nesters. There was no law in the country but the roar of six-guns and the Lonely Coyote ramrod did not hesitate to use them when his rights to the valley were questioned.

Old Thunderhead had died five years ago, but the story went that an even more ruthless hand had taken over. Word leaked out that Hell Valley was tighter now than ever, that the hard hands who worked for old Thunderhead's daughter had dubbed June Templeton "Mrs. Hell." They were more afraid of her, they said, than they had been of her pa.

Shuck Watson had felt confident at first, unafraid. The Watsons had always been the kind of folks who would tackle hell with a bucket of muddy water. He felt alone and a little foolish now. If it hadn't been for the fact that a girl disarmed him with such seeming ease, Shuck would have ridden back to Wagon Spoke, at least rearmed. But as it was, he was going into that valley without further delay. He'd be right there on the steps of purgatory when the gates of hell bursted wide open. That blamed girl had nettled his pride . . .

The big Morgan straightened out his neck and head, pulled on the reins. He cut impatiently at the ground with his feet. Shuck took one last look at the valley as a whole. It might be the last one unless he came out with Mrs. Hell strapped and gagged. If he didn't come out, there would be another mesquite limb cross in the little sand flat graveyard beside shallow Sand creek. It would be like those standing at the heads of two low nettle-sprouted mounds where his pa and his brother lay. Only it would be green and the other two crosses would be dying, maybe already blackened, with yellowish dust falling sporadically from the little round sawyer-worm holes. It would be a good enough place to spread his last bunk, out yonder by the side of a man's own kin, but the waddie had a job to do first. It was a job that only a Watson could do and he was the only one left to do it.

Shuck touched the big Morgan's flanks with his short-roweled spurs, pulled back on the reins slightly. The big black backed out of the brush carefully, pivoted and started picking his way carefully down the rough, bush-choked slope of Hell Valley.

It was getting late. The slopes were fuzzy now with heavy gloom. The slanting, red-gold rays of a setting sun found little holes in the serrated ridges and sewed giant threads of luminous crimson through the darkening valley.

SHUCK WATSON rode down the ragged slope with the feeling of wood lice crawling around in his stomach. Every moment he expected a gruff command; he listened for the click

of a rifle hammer being eared back for instant action. The big Morgan was nervous. His ears flecked forward and to the sides intermittently. The horse trembled slightly when they stopped to listen. He jumped once, almost upsetting the wary rider, when a noisy wild boar shuffled off through the brush, grunting and popping his teeth excitedly.

The waddie hugged cover. He crossed the little valley by following irregular lines of yaupon growth, keeping behind thick clumps of buckbrush.

Shuck left the big Morgan at the foot of Wolf Head Bluff. He could find the horse easier by this landmark in the night. The waddie crept forward cautiously then.

The crown of an early moon pushed its yellow brilliance over the low-lying eastern ridge in seeming reluctant pace. Shuck looked at the crescent slab of yellow pallor and smiled grimly. That old boy up there in the big cheese ball would have a front row seat for the coming little drama in Hell Valley arena tonight. Shuck Watson half-way envied the cheese-faced man.

He saw the lights then—tiny, flickering stabs of white in the gray-black distance. That would be the ranch headquarters. Those lights were a good two miles away. It would be completely dark by the time he got there.

A worried frown creased the waddie's forehead. Shuck still didn't know exactly what he was going to do after reaching the place. He had thought about it for days now and still there was no definite plan in mind. This type of thing was new to him. He'd always lead a "don't give a damn—let 'er rip!" sort of life. His troubles had been no more complicated than a pair of flaying fists could work out. But this was something different. Shuck Watson felt a little helpless.

Maybe it would have been better if he had taken life a little more seriously. He would have been in that ambush fight in Hell Valley that night eight weeks ago if he had. It might have made a difference. Pa, Ma and Cowlick too had wanted him to go further west with them. But a bronc-busting life had appealed to Shuck more. No hard things to figure out, no trials, fights with nature, long, hard days in a boiling sun—a man just had to stay on a jug-head bronc until the critter drooptailed and the wild went out of his eyes. Then Shuck would ride into town and drink up his pay with the boys. It was better, the way Shuck Watson saw it, than trying to wrestle an existence out of the wilderness. But that kind of life didn't build a man's character and self-reliance much. If it had, he might have gone into this thing in a much different way . . .

SHUCK WATSON was a little surprised at being able to approach the outbuildings without contacting a guard. They must feel pretty confident. It was foolhardy, he figured, a man walking into a hell-hound legion like this, single handed and unarmed. But then, he was a Watson.

The small pole houses were set off from the main concentration of dull lights ahead. Tiny dirt-floor hovels, these forlorn looking humps on the valley floor served to house the *vaqueros*. Shuck circled them cautiously, bent low and worked fast. A mangy cur trotted out from his bed beside one of the squalid huts. He stopped suddenly like a tight-roped steer, barked excitedly. A gruff command in Spanish quieted him temporarily.

The west now carried only a hint of dull light over the far rim of Hell Valley. The moon had not raised its head high enough yet to lighten the sprawl-

ing shadows. It was that particular time between sunset and moonrise when the world seemed darkest. It was a good time to get his bearings.

As Shuck Watson crouched tense there in the deep shadows, worked forward with a stealthy tread, his mind jumped back with intermittent regularity to that scene on the slopes. He couldn't think of Mrs. Hell and that girl with the infectious smile as being the same woman. When he thought of the incident back there, involuntarily his mind would go back to the girl with the voice of laughing water. He'd read a story once about a mean gal. It was one of the two stories that Shuck had read in all his life. The man tamed the girl and married her. But this wasn't a story. It was hard, grim life. For the first time, he'd run onto a hard row to hoe. He didn't want to marry the woman who had been responsible for the death of old Sump and Cowlick. He just wanted to see her die.

Sure the girl could be pleasant. Some of the greatest killers of that time were nice, polite, seemingly gentle people when they wanted to be. Mrs. Hell was like that. Shuck thought of the hard lines on Ma's face, the misery in her eyes and the two graves with the little mesquite crosses. He thought and he hated Mrs. Hell. Probably the only reason she had let Ma go at all was so the story of horror and death would get outside, be told around a thousand campfires, act as a grim warning to all who would settle in Hell Valley.

What the waddie believed to be Mrs. Hell's headquarters wasn't hard to find. It stood out above the other scattering buildings, as noticeable as a spring of water in the desert. Now if he could just slip in, find and gag the woman, get her out without raising too much commotion—he could come back later with help to clean out the valley of its cheap, hired murderers. He and the Judge could get men to fight men. Wagon Spoke citizens just hadn't wanted to tackle a woman like Mrs. Hell . . .

A COMPLETE circle of the house failed to disclose a light, any sign as to the whereabouts of its owner. For a moment Shuck crouched behind a thick huajillo bush, his face a dark mask of indecision. He rose then and worked out away from the big house. The moon was rising fast now. He wouldn't have much longer to stomp around unseen over the premises.

Shuck Watson stopped with a jerk then. The breath sounded loud in his nostrils. He pushed his stomach in and peered at the painted one-by-four that was nailed to the waist of a small, box-like building. He couldn't read the lettering in the deep gloom, but he needed only one guess to stamp this as the ranch office. A ragged splotch of light spilled out of a low-cut window. It was hard to work up courage to sidle out into the comparatively open ground around the building so that he could look into that window.

The waddie had always figured he lead the roost in courage. Any man who could climb astride a claybank bronc with rollers in his nose and hell in his eyes ought to have spunk. But this was a different kind of test. It was showing the waddie something about himself that he hadn't known before. It was like crawling along through a black tunnel, knowing the jaws of a giant bear trap lay open and waiting for your forearm somewhere down the stretch of black gloom, yet not knowing just when and where it would get you. These hardened murderers of Hell Valley would no more mind placing a bullet in his back, slitting his throat or stringing him to the nearest tree than they would object to

squashing a flea between their thumbnails. Especially, if they knew he was Shuck Watson . . .

The waddie breathed deep, squatted down and waddled up to the lighted window. He looked in.

A man, big of frame, dark, with trim black mustache, sat pouring over a ledger. A curl of bluish-white cigar smoke spiraled lazily toward the ceiling. A pen scratched sporadically. Shuck experienced an upward surge of impatient excitement. It was like a spring of cold water welling up inside a parched stomach. It made the waddie feel a little dizzy. He didn't know just what to do next.

Shuck Watson thought of old Sump. He had always laughed at the old man's cautiousness, his wisdom, his downright mania for planning things out. What would old Sump do in a case like this? For the first time in his life the waddie felt young and foolish and unsure of himself. If old Sump had been in a nest of hornets, he'd get something to protect himself with first. The waddie looked enviously at the black-handled gun in the polished holster on the man's waist. He watched the man twitch his upper lip, causing the trim mustache to jump around on his face. If he could slip in around at the front and creep up on this fellow, maybe he could shut that big man up before an alarm could be given. He'd have a gun then in case hell did bust loose. It would be easier to go out shooting.

THE young waddie rose. He crept carefully around the window and started toward the front entrance of the tiny building.

Shuck heard a low command then. The blood seemed to curdle in his veins. He turned slowly and stared at the figure walking toward him from a clump of ragged broomweed. Sharply, Shuck Watson sucked in his breath.

It was a woman. Her face was hard, the eyes boring. She held the dark muzzle of a Winchester on his middle. Mrs. Hell had gotten the drop on him again.

"I thought you looked like too big a fool to take sound advice!" the girl said quietly. Her voice was a flintlike monotone. "Raise your hands." She nodded her head to the left. "Start walking toward the big two story building yonder."

Shuck Watson swallowed dryly. Those blamed wood lice were crawling around in his stomach again. He hesitated. The girl advanced. She gestured by jerking her rifle barrel sharply to the left. "Start moving, cowboy!"

Shuck Watson thought, *"Too big a fool!"* The waddie's apprehension faded slowly. It was replaced by a sensation every mite as strong. He could feel hot anger surging within him, warming his whole body like a quick drink of strong liquor on an empty stomach. He was supposed to be a rough and ready, bronc-busting, fairly smart thinking full grown man—even if he was still a little young. And yet this blamed woman had put the dead wood on him twice, right hand running! It was one hell of a hard pill to swallow.

Shuck glanced at the rifle quickly. The hammer wasn't back. The girl's slender thumb hooked across it meaningly. She'd have to pull it back, release the trigger. It was a chance he'd have to take.

The girl was close to him now. Shuck Watson lunged forward and to the side. With his left hand he grasped the rifle, blocking the hammer action. His right balled into a hard fist and drove against the girl's right temple. She gasped, then fell backward without a sound.

The waddie bent over her quickly.

It was the first time he'd ever struck a woman. But Mrs. Hell was no woman. She was some sort of misfit in life that had taken on the shape of a human form. She couldn't have a soul and heart like other people and still destroy, trample and kill as she had.

Shuck permitted himself the luxury of a tight smile. Victory had been easier than he had anticipated. He'd gag her quickly now with his old brow-mop, tie her up and leave out quietly. He'd even have her gun if someone jumped him now. Eyeballs would pop when he'd ride into Wagon Spoke with Mrs. Hell bound and gagged and draped across his saddle. It was the way he'd promised old Sump and Cow-lick he'd do it. He might even stop by their graves and tell them about it. Shuck would also tell them that he'd be back later with some help—that when he left out of Hell Valley then there would be no one left in it to shoot, rob and burn struggling nesters.

The waddie worked fast. He mumbled while he bound the girl. "I've heard 'bout women that were borned killers," he said, lips tight, "but this is the first time I ever had dealin's with one!"

Shuck rose to a half crouch, his work finished. He reached out for the fallen rifle then.

"If you don't mind, son—just let it lie there!" For the second time in five minutes the waddie froze rigid as he listened to hard, confident words of command. "If you will just raise your hands now—"

SHUCK pulled his hand away from the rifle with an effort. It would be foolish to make a dive for it. The man had him dead center, close range. And the man's voice was cool.

"My name is Jake Swanson," the big man said, moving in closer. "Who are you?"

He might as well tell. The girl would make known his identity when she came to. "Shuck Watson," the waddie said flatly.

The big man's gun jerked upward slightly. Shuck thought he saw a certain tightening of the face muscles, but he couldn't be sure. The light was bad. But it was good enough for him to see something the waddie hadn't noticed about the dark, husky frame while the man sat over his desk in the little office. Jake Swanson's head sat at a peculiar angle on his shoulders. It was drawn over toward the left as if a bailing wire was connected with the top of his head and left shoulder, then stretched tight.

"Carry June inside and release her," the man commanded, almost politely.

Shuck picked up the light form, walked around the building and into the light. He untied her bindings, took the gag from her mouth. She stirred uneasily.

Jake Swanson was neatly dressed in black. He might have been taken for an Eastern business man save for his heavy tan, the cowboy boots, and a conservative black hat that rested on his desk. The man looked at Shuck and smiled. He stepped to a corner for a pan and water, bathed the girl's face, then walked over and pulled a long rope. A single sharp clap pealed out into the air. The reverberations sounded like the instrument of summons was a huge church bell stationed in the shallow loft.

The girl opened her eyes then. Jake Swanson knelt and helped her up. He was gentle, even polite. Throughout all his actions, however, the big man kept Shuck Watson within his range of vision. The muzzle of his polished .44 never wavered. Automatically, it seemed to Shuck, it stayed trained on his middle. It gave the waddie an eerie,

creeping sensation. Something about the man himself made Shuck want to slide out a back door. Things around here weren't natural. But his curiosity was so strong that the waddie was forgetting to be afraid.

The girl looked at Jake Swanson. She looked at Shuck then. Not the slightest trace of emotion seeped from her damp face.

"I'm sorry if you were caused any inconvenience, madam," the big man said in a voice that rode on velvet.

The girl did not reply. She turned and walked out the door. Sounds of her sharp bootheels died away quickly on the soft night air.

A man walked into the room. He was big, fat, red of face, the type that would enjoy bluster. He regarded the waddie with frank curiosity.

"We have another visitor, Shung," Jake Swanson said, holstering his gun. "Give him the Hangnoose Suite!" The man seated himself before the big desk then, picked up a well-ashed cigar and resumed his work.

"Hump it, saddle bum!" the fat man boomed. He nudged the waddie harshly with the end of his heavy .45

Shuck Watson sighed. He turned around and walked out of the door.

THE Hangnoose Suite was merely the boxed-in frame of an old windmill. It was close and damp and stank of musty harness. Evidently it supplied water for nearby corrals. The moving parts of the mill were dry. The thing moaned dismally as the huge blades turned sporadically in response to a slight breeze. Water dripped with maddening regularity from a leak in the pipes. It was black dark inside, and the fat man had left no light.

But the Hangnoose Suite was solid. It was probably built for harness shelter but with the thought in mind of keeping prisoners in it. Shuck groped in the darkness, felt of the moist walls. One quick surveyal left him with little doubt he would stay in the Hangnoose Suite until they decided to take him out.

The waddie sat on his heels then and leaned against a dry spot in the moulding walls. Remorse that matched the blackness of his gloomy cell welled up within him. He ought to have known better. He ought to have planned it different. He ought—that's the way it was when plans went wrong. A man could think of half a dozen things he should have done then.

Shuck Watson had been in the musty enclosure little more than an hour when the heavy door squeaked open. An elongated slice of light etched out the heavy gloom. The man called Shug thrust his face inside and smiled grimly.

"Mrs. Hell has passed judgment on yuh!" he said quickly. "She says you're too damned curious. You hang at sunrise!"

Shuck Watson's under jaw dropped in a short, involuntarily gasp. Not that he hadn't expected it. But the thing seemed too cold blooded, so much like an unimportant joke. He walked forward, was about to ask the guard a question when the fat man slammed the door in his face. A thin, high pitched cackle melted slowly on the still air as the man walked away. It made Shuck Watson's scalp shift on his head.

The waddie slept little that night. The monotonous leak in the water pipes became maddening. With the aging darkness, a damp, penetrating coldness made existence in the wet, musty cell miserable. The long hours dragged out. Shuck's mind grew weary. He dozed a little along toward dawn.

THE waddie awoke with a start. He was stiff from cold. A new seep had opened up and ran down the wall at his

back. His shoulder blades were wet, stiff, seemingly encased in a thin sheet of ice. He stirred around blindly. Hope of escape from the tiny enclosure was dead within him now. Shuck had gone over every inch of wall, ceiling and floor surface several times already. There was no place even wide enough in the tough oak walls to attempt an opening.

The waddie swore. They could at least have given him a warm bed to sleep in on his last night. He walked in a circle to keep warm, following around the inclined walls. *Hang at dawn. Mrs. Hell. Not human. Too pretty to be a witch, but still not human. She'll be there to watch me hang.* Shuck's mind worked overtime. And as it worked, fragments of a grim resolution built themselves into a course of action in his mind. It was a desperate plan all right. It woudn't help him any to be sure, but at the same time it couldn't hurt him much. The waddie s m i l e d. They wouldn't be expecting any resistance from a man about to be hanged. They'd only expect Shuck Watson to plead for his life. He'd pick an opportune time, break away and grab the first gun in sight. He'd shoot Mrs. Hell first. Then pull trigger on that suave, polished big dark man who smoked the loud smelling cigars and twitched a thick upper lip. He'd get as many as he could before they got him. It wouldn't save his neck, but he'd go out feeling better—one hell of a lot better!

Bootheels c l i c k e d on the rocky ground outside the door. The heavy wooden shutter scraped and Shug, the fat guard, looked in cautiously.

"Git up!" he said and smiled thinly. "Yore hangin's ready!"

"I'm hungry" Shuck said, parrying for time. "Don't I get any breakfast?"

"Waste of good food!" the fat man answered. He laughed deep.

Shuck walked out into the gray dawn. It was threatening weather. He heard a red bird's clear call in the sassafras brush along a shallow drain. A crow cawed languidly from a strip of timber across the creek. The air was brisk, alive. It was like any other morning on the range—only it was the one marked for his death. The waddie couldn't seem to realize that he was going to die. He reckoned nobody could until they were dead. But a man didn't realize anything after he was dead. Shuck rubbed red eyes and shook his head to clear it of those little silly thoughts. His mind was eternally turning over small things when he should be thinking big. The whole damned thing was mixed up though. And the waddie had thought about it all night. His mind was worn out.

Shug held a cocked .45 on his middle. A tall, lanky henchman with shifty eyes and a tendency to glance quickly to the right and left without turning his head, walked up.

"Orders are to bring him over to the old hackberry," the man said. "They'll be there in ten minutes."

THEY stopped at a gnarled giant of a tree on the fringe of a little glade down behind the corrals. The lanky man held a gun on Shuck while Shug threw a rope over the limb and fashioned a crude noose. "My name's Shug Sanderson, if you don't know already," the fat man said while he worked. "Tall fellow there we call Coyote Telk. He'll kick the box out from under yuh. Me an' Coyote, we alus get a'quainted with th' idjuts we hang!"

Shuck eyed the loose-hung .45 on the fat man's thigh. He heard leaves crackle as three men came down the trail. With a pang of disappointment he saw that Mrs. Hell wasn't with them. Maybe she thought herself above witnessing the death of an unimportant

revenge-seeking bronc buster.

"Good morning, Mr. Watson!" Jake Swanson called, coming to a stop a few yards from the waddie. "Go on with the hanging, Shug," he commanded without waiting for a possible reply. He smiled cheerfully, showing an even row of white upper teeth.

A big muscled man with hairy arms and a flat, brutish looking face walked over and placed a feed box under the tree. He looked at Shuck, grinned in seeming fiendish anticipation. He walked back to his two companions then. The third member of the waiting group was a dried-up, squint-eyed, slippery looking individual. There was no expression on his face. He stood whittling idly at a mesquite twig with a long-bladed, horn-handled knife.

They are a little far away. I still won't get to kill Mrs. Hell. But this is the best I can do. Now, I reckon, is the time. Cold sweat made the waddie's hands sticky as he thought. He glanced at the low-hung gun on the fat man's thigh again. Shuck Watson took a deep breath. He tensed impatient muscles.

The bareheaded little man in the black coat came tearing down the woods trail like hell-fire was on his tail. He looked like a tiny brown shadow floating through the gloom of a gathering storm. He stopped before Jake Swanson. For a moment he stood there staring at the big man with eyes that did not blink. The little man opened his mouth then. His words seemed a long time coming out.

"I couldn't help it, Jake!" he said in a voice of desperation. "I swear, I did everything possible. Sometimes it just isn't—"

A sudden fierceness crept into the gentle quietness of Jake Swanson's brown eyes. "I never break a promise, Will," he said. The man's voice was smooth, deadly. His outer calmness never wavered. It was only the eyes that opened the window to his heart. The big man's hand dipped leisurely.

"Jake—don't . . ." The little man ducked, tried to get behind the squint-eyed individual for protection. But the bullet caught him first. He gripped the man tightly for an instant. Then his muscles relaxed. He seemed to sigh and slid limply to the ground.

WITHOUT changing expressions, the squint-eyed man turned and kicked at the limp body as if in resentment of the dead man having tried to make a shield of him.

"Let him alone, Mole-eye," Jake Swanson said. He blew carelessly at the whirl of blue smoke drifting lazily from the barrel of his big .44 and smiled. "Will didn't think I'd do it," he said, tapping the barrel of his gun across the palm of his left hand in meditation. "He could always talk me out of things. I've been too easy on him."

The big man turned on the heel of a polished boot then. "Hold up the hangin' for awhile, Shug," he called back over his shoulder. "We'll make it at sundown. Take care of the doc, Coyote."

The slinky-looking individual glanced absently at the doctor's still body, looked uneasily at the approaching storm. "I'll just dig one hole for both of 'um," he said, brightening. Turning to Shuck the man continued. "He's little. He won't crowd you none!"

Shug Sanderson marched him back to the cold, damp little prison then. It started sprinkling rain.

"What happened?" Shuck asked frankly as he bent to step inside the enclosure.

"A death and a killin'," the fat man chuckled. "First time anybody died natural 'round here in a long time!"

A white-headed old Negro brought the waddie's breakfast. Shug Sanderson, who always seemed to be nearby, let him in. The old man's face was kind. He was wrinkled and bent and he limped on his left leg as if it were partly stiff. He put the tray on an apple box, pointed at a biscuit. He touched the piece of round bread with a yellow finger, looked up at the waddie. The glance was penetrating, significant. He turned then and walked outside.

"I'll leave the door open for fifteen minutes," Shug Sanderson said, "so you'll have light to eat by. I'm sittin' outside with a cocked gun. Don't try no tricks!"

WITH a hand that trembled slightly, Shuck Watson reached for the biscuit, broke it open. A tight roll of paper pierced its soft interior like a toothpick thrust through a stuffed olive. Shuck unfolded the paper and read:

Be ready in one hour to make a break. Old Rufe will let you out. Two horses will be waiting below the creek crossing. I'm leaving the valley with you. I'll explain everything later.

June Templeton

Shuck Watson bunched his eyebrows. Quick hope warmed him inside, sent a flush of blood running over his body. A cold pang of doubt followed. It must be a trick. Why should Mrs. Hell write a note like that? The mystery of the whole ranch, the unbelievable characters, the way things happened, Mrs. Hell—it wasn't possible!

"Even if it is a trick," the waddie mumbled aloud, "it'd be better than dying without a chance! And why ought anyone want to trick me? They've got me tricked might-nigh to death now. All that's lackin' is the hang noose. I couldn't be no worse off!"

There might be some friction between Mrs. Hell and the polite eastern-looking individual who seemed to have a hand on the whip handle. Maybe a possible dispute over power would work to his advantage. The waddie's jaw set. He clenched damp hands. When old Rufe came for him, he'd be ready!

It was the longest hour in Shuck Watson's life. Rain beat incessantly against the solid walls. It would be a good time for break all right. When he heard running feet outside, the waddie jumped up, nerves on edge. The huge lock grated. The door swung open.

"Hurry, suh!" old Rufe implored in a voice that trembled with emotion. "Take out through them Jimpson weeds, straight fo' th' creek. Miss June'll be thar at th' crossin'. I done run all th' hosses outta th' corrals. They'll hafta foller on foot. God bless you an' Miss June, suh!"

"Much obliged, Rufe!" the waddie said, edging out the narrow doorway. "You better come with me."

"I nevah could make it," the old darky said. "Go ahead, suh—hurry!"

Shuck caught a glimpse of Shug Sanderson sprawled on the dirt floor of a nearby tool shed, temporarily knocked out. He heard somebody shout then from the little office building a hundred and fifty yards away. The rain had slackened suddenly. He ducked his head and ran through the tall Jimpson growth. If he could only hold that hundred and fifty yard lead . . .

A bullet batted through the weeds with the slapping sound of pressure-shuffled cards. He heard someone else holler—a hoarse voice giving directions.

Shuck Watson ran blindly. He couldn't see twenty feet through the thick weeds, so he had to run by dead reckoning. And it had to be right. He

couldn't afford to miss the crossing far.

More firing came from behind. Lead whistled by dangerously close. They could determine his route through the heavy growth by the tops of swaying weeds.

SHUCK looked back as he ran across a shallow rise. The weeds were lower here, stunted on the almost solid clay knoll. The waddie saw Rufe Potts bend over and grip his stomach. The old servant teethered unsteadily for a moment and pitched to the ground on his face. Jake Swanson shot the old darky again as he lay on the ground. The big man entered the weed patch then at a long run. He snapped a shot at the waddie as Shuck turned and bore into the remaining half of the weed field.

Blood trickled through the sweat on his forehead when Shuck Watson reached the strip of clearing bordering the creek. His hands were torn also by the rough weeds. He hesitated momentarily, looked up and down. Shuck heard the dull roar of rushing water. He saw a notch in the creek bank to his left. That must be the crossing. He was in the open now, running recklessly. Whizzing bits of lead spun through the air above and on both sides of him. An almost spent slug hit the ground behind the running waddie, bounced and dug into the chaps on his left leg like an angry bumble bee.

But he made it.

June Templeton emerged suddenly from a tiny clump of yaupon brush. She ran to him with a little cry of concern. "Take these quick!" the girl said, glancing up his back trail. She handed a carbine and a cartridge belt with two holstered guns. "I had hoped they wouldn't notice the break so soon!" The girl's voice was a little frantic. We could never get the horses to swim the creek now. I hadn't figured on a flash flood when I planned this out. The horses are upstream in a clump of willows—but we can't get anywhere unless we cross the creek!"

"We got to try it, or do somethin'—quick!" Shuck yelled above the roar of the storm. It had started raining heavily again. Ragged lightning ripped the sky apart.

"Follow me!" the girl cried, her jaw set in sudden resolve. She headed downstream. Shuck Watson didn't understand, but he followed.

The girl found a dim path through the thick underbrush. She bent low and ran. The trail was muddy. She slipped once, fell sprawling. Shuck helped her up. It was strange why a surge of warmth should course through him as he touched her. She wasn't warm. She was cold and wet.

Two hours ago Shuck Watson was wanting to shoot this woman. Now he was following her blindly—following her down a slippery mud trail by the side of a roaring creek. He was wet, cold and scared; his mind refused to function rationally any more. Shuck Watson wondered where the hell it would all end up.

THAT slight delay at the crossing had been costly. The men were on their trail down the creek already. Shuck could imagine how Jake Swanson would look when he saw that tiny feminine track in the mud beside the imprint of the waddie's big boot.

"Quick!" the girl said. "Get it loose!" The train ends a little further on down. They'll never be able to stay up with us on foot and through the thick undergrowth—unless there is another boat! There may be. I don't know."

Shuck Watson's heart leaped. The boat looked well built. He slid down

the muddy bank behind the girl, steadied her, then unwrapped the rusty trace chain that held the boat moored to a leaning willow. Shuck crawled in behind the girl then, reached for the lone paddle.

It was heavy, clumsy. But it would keep them in the center of the wild stream if he could handle it right. Feverishly, Shuck dug the blade into the dirty water, pulled back. The aft end of the tiny craft slid out into the creek. The current caught it and sucked the boat downstream. But they were going down backwards. Shuck didn't know much about boats, but he knew that the sharp end should go first. They were easier to steer that way.

The skiff rammed hard into a pile of driftwood at the beginning of a sharp turn. A strong current caught the nose of the little boat, spun it around. They were going right now. The waddie looked back up the long, straight stretch of water they had just traversed. He saw the men firing. Tiny spurts of water burst forth on both sides of the troubled mid-current. The little boat swept around a bend then.

"Watch out for the dam!" the girl warned. "If the creek isn't up enough yet, we'll have to pull the boat around it. Jake Swanson had it built to make a fishing pool. It backed up water for nearly a mile. He had two boats on it at first. I never did see the other one."

The foam-capped current pulled them down at a sickening pace. The rain came in torrents now. Lightning flashed. Thunder rolled. Shuck gripped the big oar. His knuckles showed white on the brown wood. It wasn't difficult, guiding the wildly careening boat down a straight stretch. It was when they hit the bends that Shuck had to fight to keep them from piling up on the bank, crashing into a boulder or splintering the boat against the protruding roots of a huge oak.

THEY were shooting down a fairly straight stretch now. Shuck heard the familiar moan of a ricocheting bullet again. He turned and looked back uneasily. A tiny water gyser spouted up directly behind the boat. The leaden slug skipped on the rolling water and buried itself in the thick aft boards.

"They've found the other boat!" The girl strained to make herself heard above the roar of the storm. "We can't afford to pile up now—even stop for a moment!"

Shuck saw the dam ahead. It looked like the creek came to an end all of a sudden, that the small lake just stopped there in mid air and went no further. But a rolling roar of rushing, white water told a different story. Shuck saw the hollow trough in the wide pool of water formed by the dam. If it was merely rough, swift water, they might make it. But anything resembling falls would founder them hopelessly. And yet they couldn't afford to pull around to the end of the dam, work the boat across, slide it back into the creek. There wasn't time . . .

"Hold steady!" Shuck shouted, his lips tight with sudden resolve. "We're gonna take it!"

The girl smiled. For just a fleeting moment her eyes softened. "I like your spirit, cowboy!" she said, hardly loud enough to be heard above the roar of white water ahead.

The waddie tensed, paddled the nose of the frail craft into the trough. Instantly it was caught by the powerful suction, carried along like a leaf on a racing mill stream. There was a tingling, falling sensation in Shuck Watson's stomach as the boat shot forward. It made him catch his breath.

The creek was high enough to partly bridge in the lower waters past the

dam and the tiny lake. The little boat pitched wildly. It shivered and took the swirling rapids. It dipped water and veered crazily in the angry cross currents. It shot through a trough between two ragged boulders with a sliding bump on the aft end as it swung out dizzily.

But it held together. There was a foot of water in the bottom, however, when they hit a straight course again. It made the boat loggy. The girl reached for an empty can, started dipping water feverishly.

Their pursuers were coming over the dam rapids now. The rain had let up for a moment. The atmosphere was clearer. There were four men in the long boat. Two were paddling, a third poling. They were gaining steadily.

"They are traveling faster than we are!" the girl said. A burst of gunfire added emphasis to her sentence. "They're getting within effective gun range!"

"Here!" Shuck called. "You take the paddle! Stay down low. Keep 'er nose in the current. I'll see if I can't make 'um slow up a little." He handed her the paddle, then lay flat along the bottom. Resting his rifle on the end piece of the pitching boat, Shuck pulled back the hammer and fired. A little exclamation point of white water lifted a foot to the right of the long boat's nose and seemed to explode in the air. The waddie levered another cartridge into the firing chamber and pulled trigger again just as they swept around a gentle bend.

"It's hard to guide from the front!" the girl protested.

"Stay down low!" Shuck insisted. "We haven't lost the race yet!"

"We'll have to pull ashore and make a run for it before much longer," the girl informed him, her face dark with apprehension. "Nothing alive could make it through The Chutes with the creek up this high!"

WHEN the pursuing boat swung in sight again, the third man back dropped the long pole and reached for his gun. They were closer. Shuck could make out the crouched form of Jake Swanson leaning low in the bow. The big man was aiming deliberately, shooting methodically. That would be Mole-eye Brewster behind him. He was leaning out over the side, shooting coolly. The bulky form of Shug Sanderson and the smaller Coyote Telk were seated farther back, rowing furiously. Old Rufe evidently hadn't t a p p e d Shug's head hard enough to keep him out of the fight.

Bullets spanged angrily into the water on all sides now. One made a sodden, spluttering sound as it cut a gash in the boat at water level. Jake Swanson's skiff was within effective range now. It was only the pitching, careening, twisting course of their boat that had outmaneuvered a hit thus far. But it couldn't last much longer.

They swung around another bend then. When the pursuing boat began to take the curve, was almost broadside, Shuck shot three times in quick sucession. He saw Shug Sanderson jerk back, drop his oar, and clasp a hand on his left arm. That would slow them down some. If they could only hold this lead. They'd need it when the girl pulled them ashore at the head of The Chutes. They'd need enough time to scramble out of the boat and get out of sight in the woods.

"I can't guide the thing—I can't make it—!"

The jolt came then. Shuck looked around quickly. Preparatory to making a sharp turn, they had piled up on a huge island of drift wood.

"Get down in the boat!" Shuck

shouted at the girl. "They've got to blast us now!"

The waddie lay flat on his stomach, his head above the end board. He shot feverishly.

Jake Swanson was swinging the end of his big .44 toward the shore, jesturing frantically. Coyote Telk tried desperately to paddle the boat out of the swift current, cut it in toward the bank. But the rolling torrent pulled at it, sucked it on down. Swanson and Mole-eye Brewster were shooting steadily now. Shug Sanderson had recovered enough to hold a six-gun in his right hand. He fired grimly.

Lead splattered the muddy water, screamed through the air about Shuck and the girl. There was sudden, maddening fear in the waddie as he realized what was about to happen. Coyote Telk couldn't turn the boat. He couldn't stop its headlong plunge down the raging stream. They would come on in a close-out, lead-slinging showdown, their boats no farther than an arm's reach apart at the bloody finish. It was a forced charge, a kill or be killed proposition. No one would remain alive in one of those boats when the smoke cleared away!

SHUCK felt a slug rip into the back of his right leg at a slanting angle. He sawMole-eye Brewster duck and throw a hand up to his chest. The short carbine went dry then. Franctically, Shuck grabbed for the two guns at his side. He wouldn't have time to empty both of them with his hand. So the waddie rested their short barrels over the end board of the boat and shot with both hands as fast as he could pull back the hammers.

Three guns were thundering at him now at almost point blank range. It was like a black nightmare. The long boat closed in, pulled on by a hungry current. Darts of yellow flame licked out from blazing guns.

Shuck felt a jolt in his left side, a ripping, numbing sensation across his shoulder. It felt like lead was cutting him to pieces. He wanted to turn and bolt. Three men with smoking guns, bearing down on him in a runaway boat, was a fearful looking sight. He might have run but he was on the lip of an angry creek. The waddie didn't have anywhere to run!

A gun opened up behind him then. He remembered. The girl had been armed. It gave the waddie confidence. A grim smile creased Shuck Watson's lips. He fired his smoking Colts into a solid block of blurred humanity as the long boat closed in.

Coyote Telk stood straight up in the boat suddenly. A clawlike hand grasped his neck. He pitched forward and to the side, slid headlong into the roaring water. Shug Sanderson's little eyes were wide with fear as he looked into the smoking muzzles of Shuck Watson's guns. The big man lost his nerve, raised up to jump overboard. Shuck heard a slug spang as it hit the big stomach. The fat man's reflex nerves pushed him into the water, much in the manner of a fat bullfrog leaping into a pond.

The long boat was upon them then. Shuck saw Jake Swanson sighting at him deliberately. The waddie jerked up, to the side. Their guns roared together. Shuck felt his left side go numb. He turned as the long boat swept past, followed the form of Jake Swanson with pain-wracked eyes.

The big man swayed drunkenly, half turned, tried to bring the heavy gun up again. He stumbled then, pitched into the foam-flecked current. The boat swung crazily around the sharp bend, bumped shore, lodged and swung out again. Shuck saw the still form of Mole-eye Brewster lying face down in

it as the boat swept out of sight around the bend. The waddie sank weakly then with a low groan.

WITH the help of June Templeton, Shuck dragged himself out of the boat and onto solid ground. One of the girl's legs was stiff. There was blood on her waist.

"You hurt bad?" Shuck asked as he slumped to the ground.

"Two hits and a scratch," she said calmly. "I'll heal." The girl looked at him with dark concern then. "But you, you're shot up pretty badly!"

"I'll heal," the waddie said and smiled.

"Not unless you get some of that bleeding stopped." The girl bent over him, tore at his shirt. "It may hurt a little—I'm going to swab out some of the mud and water as I go."

"The crosses there," Shuck exclaimed. "It's where pa an'—"

"It's where Sump Watson and Cow-lick are buried," she said. "You couldn't have picked a better place on the creek to have killed Jake Swanson!"

"Pa an' Cow-lick'd like that," Shuck reflected.

"You're due some explaining," the girl offered. "If the pain isn't too bad for you to think clearly while I'm tying you together, I'll talk."

"Talk," Shuck said simply. He looked into the girl's eyes.

"It isn't a long story," June Templton began. She worked carefully, her soft fingers examining the wounds tenderly. "A year after my father died, this Jake Swanson half tricked, half persuaded Mother to marry him. He can be as smooth as silk when he wants to. He took over then. He hired Shug Sanderson, Mole-eye Brewster and Coyote Telk to help him terrorize the valley. Dad had been a pretty tough character all right—though never a murderer.

"So Jake Swanson devised a scheme that would help keep people out of the valley. Why wouldn't it be natural for the daughter of an old frontiersman like dad to be rough, hard, unrelenting—to carry on the tradition of his toughness? They started calling me 'Mrs. Hell.' Everything that happened in this valley that was bad was blamed on me. Their cowboys were instructed to make it scary. I was a virtual prisoner in Swanson's hands. He threatened my mother if I ever tried to leave, to bring in the law." The girl's lips tightened. Her eyes were watery now.

"My mother lived in a hell on earth. She saw what it was doing to me. Her health went down. This morning she took poison." June Templeton's voice broke. Her lips tightened then. She continued.

"Jake shot little old Doc Will Barker. He had commanded the man to keep mother alive. I was made prisoner then. Swanson knew I would try to get away, bring in justice after he no longer had Mother's life to hold over my head. I had only one person on the ranch I could depend on with my life. Old Rufe stayed by me."

THE girl's eyes were fixed now, staring into the floor, looking into a black past. She shuddered.

"But," Shuck Watson asked, "why were you so hard boiled with me? I would have helped."

"With Mother alive, it would only have made things worse. I tried to frighten you away," the girl explained. "Jake Swanson was a sadist. He loved to kill, to see people die. His real name was Markham Jamison. He came from the East to make his pile out West—by any method he could find. I knew he would shoot you down like a dog when he found out who you were. Jake Swan-

son never took any chances. The valley is rich. He was determined to keep it for himself."

"Them *vaqueros,*" the waddie said. "What will happen now?"

"I'll have no trouble with them," the girl answered. "They only did Jake Swanson's bidding."

The waddie sighed. "It's been tough, I know. I'm glad it's over. You need some fun out of life now to blot out the memory of so much misery." A slow smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. "I was goin' to pop eyeballs by riding into town with Mrs. Hell bound and gagged. Guess they'd pop just as wide if I ride in with my arm around her waist, the other one wavin' a marriage license! Y'reckon?"

The girl looked at him quickly. She smiled. Her eyes softened. "You better go easy," she warned. "Marrying Mrs. Hell wouldn't exactly put a halo around your head!"

"I'd be the devil at that!" Shuck said and chuckled. He was glad to see that the girl had a sense of humor even in times of stress.

"I'm changing my name, however." June Templeton spoke softly.

"I aim to change it again if we ever get to town," Shuck Watson said just as softly. "And there's no call for you to act prim an' shy. I aim to throw a halter on you and buckle it tight. I'll let you kiss me now."

"I like your spirit, cowboy!" the girl smiled. There was a warm glow in her eyes. "And when I get you pieced back together and bandaged up, I might take advantage of your offer. Right now," there was a mischievous glint in the soft eyes, "there's not enough of you left to kiss!"

★ FIGHT FOR LIFE ★

SIMON KENTON, a prisoner of the Indians for nine months, bore every torture the savages inflicted upon him, including the dreaded Mazeppa and gantlet, and survived to finally escape his captors.

Kenton, tall, blond-haired with smiling gray-blue eyes and possessing strength, agility and endurance to an uncommon degree, was one of the great back-woodsmen of early America. He was born in 1755, and early in life found his services as a scout in demand. In this capacity he served under such men as Colonel Boone and General Clark.

It was while the latter was marching to Kaskaskia in 1778, during the American Revolutionary War, that Kenton was sent to spy on Chillicottie, a British outpost. His party was discovered by Indians and in the ensuing chase, several of the party were killed. Kenton, himself, was captured after a fierce hand-to-hand struggle.

Taken to the Indians' village, he was subjected to all degrees of humiliation and torture. First, he was bound naked to the back of an untamed horse, which was then turned loose. This was the deadly Mazeppa, from which few returned alive. To the great delight of the savages, the frightened horse plunged through the brush and into the woods returning finally with Kenton bruised, cut, mangled and all but dead.

In this condition he was tied to the cold ground, exposed to mosquitoes and gnats. To add to his misery the savages crowded around him jeering, kicking and beating him.

The next day, barely able to stand, he was made to understand that he was to run the gantlet. The Indians ranged themselves in two parallel lines, armed with hickory rods and sticks. The line extended for a half-mile and the prisoner had to run the entire extent to reach safety. Kenton summoned his last ounce of strength and courageously raced down the line, receiving the full fury of the Indians' blows. At the end he fell to the ground and was beaten and kicked by the mob and left as dead. But in a few hours he revived and the Indians nourished him so that he might hear the next judgment of the Indian Council regarding his fate.

The decision was to make a public sacrifice of him at Wappatomica. On route there he made a desperate attempt to escape, only to be recaptured and subjected to new severities. This time he was taken to a nearby creek, dragged through mud and water and almost drowned.

At Wappatomica, Simon Kenton's fortune began to change. He met Simon Girty, a renegade but a good friend of his. He threw himself at Girty's mercy and the latter responded to the appeal. He persuaded the Indians to have Kenton turned over to the British commandant in Detroit, from where he made his final escape.—*Gary Lee Horton.*

SONS of the WEST—Kit Carson

(See Back Cover)

THE making of the West was the most picturesque, perilous, era in the history of America. The men who trapped, fought, and died in the West were a hardy, colorful lot. Out of these surroundings came outstanding men who distinguished themselves by their unparalleled exploits. One of the first and most popular of these adventurers was Christopher Carson, commonly known as Kit Carson. He was a daring and impressive character who threw aside all rules of personal safety so that the West might become peaceful and habitable for mankind.

He was born on December 24, 1809 in Madison County, Kentucky. While yet a baby his family migrated to Missouri, then a rough, unsettled border territory. In these surroundings Kit quickly learned the lore of the wilderness and became used to danger and peril. For fifteen years, the boy lived in Missouri and he became a rather excellent marksman. Then Kit was sent to work for a saddler, much to his distress. He longed for the wild, open plains where the rifle and pistol were a man's best friend.

After about two years of monotonous work with the saddler he joined up with a band of traders who were traveling to Santa Fe. Impressed by the boy's ability, the traders accepted the boy as one of them. The armed party miraculously arrived in Santa Fe unharmed.

Twelve of them started back. In order to avoid Indians, they traveled along an extremely southern route where the climate was warm and comfortable. One morning the twelve adventurers noticed a moving speck far to their rear. This speck resolved itself into a band of war-like Indians who were out for blood. The traders prepared to defend themselves against the onslaught of the savages. The Indians, however, were somewhat apprehensive of the white man's rifle, and consequently stopped a short distance from the little party. The Indians then pretended to be friendly but the men retained their guns in firing positions as they resumed travel—to trust an Indian in such a situation meant inevitable disaster. But a man named Pratte lagged behind and several of the more bold savages made a lunge at him and succeeded in killing him. This was the start of the battle.

Immediately a torrent of arrows fell upon the little band, and also several Indians fell dead. Though the Indians possessed an extremely high numerical superiority, they were cautious because of the rifles and retreated a short distance. However, within a few hours, the savages had managed to kill all the mules and horses. The traders hid behind their hastily built barricade while the Indians retained a constant vigilance.

After a few days had elapsed, the Indians relaxed their vigilance and the traders decided to escape. Although they realized the chances were completely against them, they proceeded to creep through the grass cautiously under the cover of darkness. There were ten of them who finally found themselves outside the Indian encirclement.

THE weary band of men continued on their march home. But they suffered extreme torture at the hand of Nature. Lack of food and water left its mark. So distressing was the suffering they were forced to endure that several became delirious from wounds suffered in the battle and they were left behind to die. After considerable exposure seven of the ten men reached safety. Thus, early in his youth, Kit Carson was initiated into the battles and hardships of the western plains.

The ambitious youth then fell in with a party of trappers who had been chased off their hunting grounds by a tribe of hostile Indians. The trappers, eager for revenge, got together a band of about forty men, among them Kit Carson, in order to punish the Indians. The band caught up with the aggressive Indians and made short work of them, killing about twenty warriors and putting the rest to rout. Carson's knowledge and outstanding service ability made him a useful member of the band of trappers under Owen Young.

After a period of successful trapping, the party, including Kit, started for California. They successfully but uneventfully reached California where Kit soon displayed his extensive knowledge of trapping. Carson also studied the landscape and countryside through which he was traveling so that this knowledge would be available whenever he needed it. The party then traveled to the Colorado river and encamped. One day a band of hostile Indians entered the camp, confidently and boldly knowing most of the trappers were in the forest. However, the camp was being guarded by Kit and a few other trappers.

Kit ordered the Indians out of the camp, threatening that they would pay dearly for any plunder. Awed at this display of courage the Indians quietly left the camp.

Later Carson left this party and joined an expedition under a Captain Lee. They trapped all summer with rather exceptional success. It was on this adventure that he encountered grizzly bears. Kit had just finished bringing down an elk when two grizzly bears suddenly charged toward him. Since his gun was unloaded, Kit's only avenue of escape was to climb the closest tree. He cut off a limb, and whenever the hungry bears attempted to grab him would poke them hard in the face. This defense continued through the night until the bears finally gave up and Carson wearily made his way back to the camp.

IN THE vicinity of Carson's camp there was a bold, swaggering bully named Captain Shunan. One morning this desperado swaggered up to Kit

and said, "These Americans are all cowards; they are all woman. I am going into the bush to cut some rods and I'll switch everyone of them."

Kit Carson calmly stepped forward and in his delightful manner said, "Captain Shunan, I am an American and one of the smallest and weakest of them all. We have no disposition to quarrel with anyone. But this conduct can no longer be endured. If it is continued I shall be under the necessity of shooting you." The herculean blusterer glanced down at Kit, turned about, and walked toward his camp. However, Captain Shunan came riding back with a rifle in his hand. Carson, also upon a horse, rode toward his challenger who raised his rifle and fired. At the same instant Kit Carson fired at the killer's arm, shattering his wrist. The bullet from Shunan's rifle glanced over Carson's head. Shunan was completely squelched and his arm was crippled for life.

After eventful years of successful trapping, Carson returned to Missouri where he met Lieutenant John C. Fremont of the United States Army. Fremont had been assigned the task of exploring the wild country between the frontiers of Missouri and the Rocky Mountains and to obtain useful data pertinent to the territory. Finding Carson a suitable man, he hired him as a guide and scout for his expedition. The expedition consisted of twenty-one men, well-armed, sturdy backwoodsmen.

The country, although unknown, was beautiful and it was rather enjoyable to travel through. Some difficulty, however, was incurred while attempting to ford the swollen Kansas River. After considerable effort, the party successfully forded the stream and continued their march through level country until they reached the Platte river.

All during the trip Fremont obtained valuable geological and astronomical data which was to be of considerable importance in the settling of this hitherto unexplored region. Upon completion of the trip, Kit Carson remained at Fort Laramie while the expedition returned to St. Louis.

IT WAS not long before Carson was once again teamed up with Fremont on a perilous journey to California. On this trip the suffering endured by the men was extreme, the food supply was scanty, and game was difficult to find. However, after much suffering and misfortune the expedition successfully arrived at Fort Sutter. This outstanding trip gave Fremont fame and glory.

During the return trip Carson ran across several Mexicans including a young Mexican boy whose mother and father had been captured by savages. Feeling sorry for the boy, Carson and a companion set out in pursuit of the Indians. After two days of hard travel, they caught up with them. The pair attacked the unsuspecting Indians, and Carson's first bullet pierced the heart of the Indian chief.

Thinking that the two men were an advance guard of a large posse, the Indians fled with fear, leaving everything behind. The captives, however, had been cruelly slaughtered. Kit took the horses and returned them to the Mexicans.

At the conclusion of this mission, Kit decided to settle down, but fate had plotted another course for him. Colonel Fremont was starting a third expedition and it was imperative that he have his close friend, Kit, accompany him on this hazardous trip. One night they set up camp, but thinking that no Indians were in the immediate territory, failed to set up a night guard. During the night a band of hostile Indians sneaked into camp and killed several men. Immediately aroused, Carson and his men fired upon the cutthroats who fled.

War broke out between Mexico and the United States, and Fremont decided it advisable to return to their base. But first he wanted to punish the Indians who had so wantonly killed his men. He dispatched Kit Carson at the head of ten strong backwoodsmen to overtake the blood-thirsty Indians. After a grueling travel, Carson and his men came upon the Indian Village. They cautiously approached the village and then charged like lightning down through the camp. After a brief skirmish, the Indians, sensing defeat, fled. Wishing to inflict a severe penalty on the savages, Carson burnt their village to the ground.

After this fight, the party continued the trip although they were continuously harassed by unfriendly Indians. Finally they reached Los Angeles and safety. At this time it was necessary to send a dispatch to Washington because of the war. But the dispatch carrier had to travel through thousands of miles of unchartered, wild, Indian-infested territory. Regardless of the imminent dangers, Carson undertook the hazardous task on September 15, 1846, being placed in command of fifteen picked mountaineers.

AFTER a month of difficult traveling Kit Carson was met by General Kearney who was in command of United States troops going to California. He relieved Carson of the dispatch and had it forwarded to Washington. Carson then became guide for the American soldiers and while guiding them, the party encountered Mexican troops.

Without hesitation, Carson charged toward the Mexicans. His horse slipped and he was thrown to the ground where he miraculously escaped death when the American horsemen charged in his wake. He was soon back in the midst of the fighting and distinguished himself so much that he was awarded a commission in the United States Army.

After the war, Carson served as a government agent on Indian reservations for many years. He was continually in the service of the United States during his older age. After a long, daring, and eventful life he died at Fort Lyon, Colorado on May 23, 1868 at the age of sixty. Kit Carson will always be remembered because of the invaluable service he rendered to his country and because of the matchless exploits he accomplished while under the command of his friend, Fremont, and during his trapping days when he became known as one of the best trappers in the West. He will forever live in the hearts of free Americans everywhere as a shining symbol of Americanism.

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SONS OF THE WEST

KIT CARSON

He was one of the most famed of the heroes of the West. His name is a by-word in American history, and of a type of adventurer that cannot be duplicated by any other nation in history. He is truly American. He was born on Dec. 24, 1809, in Madison County, Kentucky, where he lived for 15 years. Then the bug for adventure bit him and he took the Santa Fe Trail. That was the beginning of a career of Indian fighting that was to make his name a legend. His greatest exploit was an attack on an Indian village at the head of ten men. Greatly outnumbered, he won a victory that is almost incredible. (Story on page 177)